



God is W/here?

Advent in a Messy World

Nov. 26	Where is God in the Homeless Camp?
Dec 3	Where is God when Christmas is All Around?
Dec 10	Where is God in Music? (Cantata Sunday)
Dec 17:	Where is God in Gaza and Ukraine?
Dec 24th (9 am and 10:45)	Where is God When We are Sick and Tired?
Christmas Eve (5 pm, 8 pm, 11 pm)	God is Here!
Dec 31	Where is God When We Don't Know What to do Next?

The debate has begun. Every year at this time a debate about when we can start decorating for Christmas and singing Christmas songs occurs; this year I started hearing the debate before Halloween. In my family, we decorate for Halloween in October, Thanksgiving in November, and then when Thanksgiving is over we can think about Christmas. But others start earlier than that. It is a weird debate.

But for the church calendar, there is no debate about when Christmas starts. Christmas begins on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day and then goes on for 12 days until January 6, when we celebrate Epiphany. For the Church, this time before Christmas is Advent—four Sundays of Advent before we get to Christmas.

This year is the odd year when the fourth Sunday of Advent is also Christmas Eve, which makes the season of Advent very short. The worship committee decided to start Advent a week earlier, so we are starting on November 26.

Advent is a season of preparation for the coming of Christ: preparation to celebrate Jesus' birth at Christmas, to receive faithfully the risen Christ who comes to us in Word and Spirit, and to await in hope Christ's coming in final victory. The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning "coming." While the rest of the world is arguing about when we can start singing Christmas songs, we are waiting. We are preparing our hearts, our homes, our church for this amazing Gift of the God who comes to us: the God who is here even when we are not sure where God is.

Our greatest challenge is to make Advent a time of expectation for Christ's coming to be with us, not a frantic time of meeting secular demands of the season.

What are ways that you can make Advent most meaningful for you?

Take some time to ponder what it is that you need during this season of Advent. Think back to other years. What has kept you from fully experiencing the true meaning of Christmas? Maybe it was too many obligations. This year, plan to limit how many Christmas things you go to. Maybe it was spending too much money on presents. This year, make a budget for Christmas and stay in that budget. Maybe it was simply getting to Christmas and wondering what it really is all about.

Some suggestions for making the most of Advent:

- 1) What is your favorite Christmas song (could be secular or religious)? When you hear that song, stop for a few minutes, take a deep breath, and give God thanks for this season.
- 2) Put in your calendar moments to stop. It can be for just five minutes. Those spaces to stop, to just sit and breathe, can be moments of resetting in a very busy time.
- 3) Make the commitment to read the devotion booklet every day this season. Read the scripture and ponder what it is saying to you. What does the devotion say to you? What is God saying to you?
- 4) Use the Breath Prayers in the devotion book.
- 5) Come to church all the Sundays of Advent and on the evening of Christmas Eve. Get to church a few minutes early, so you can be seated before the Prelude begins. Use the space of the prelude to breath, to center your heart for worship. Ask God to speak to you during the service. Then listen for God through the service. During the Postlude, thank God for the service and listen for what God might be calling you to do during the week.

Our theme for Advent is God is W/Here? Advent in a messy world. We will look at some of the hard places where we wonder where God is: in the homeless camp, in Gaza and Ukraine; and even where is God when the world is already celebrating secular Christmas. This will be less a time of offering answers than of coming to get to sit in hard questions. This world does not align with God's vision for it. This world does not appear to be getting closer to alignment. How do we rejoice when the world weeps? We will ask hard questions as we hear God's promises and ask together: "God, are you here?" And even when we encounter God's answer in the birth of a child who is Word made flesh...still we will ask: what now?

This waiting AND preparation is a time for us to ask hard questions...of God, of ourselves, of each other. And lean into the warmth we find in asking these questions together...and in our hope that light will yet break forth from on high.

The devotion book we are using is from Presbyterian Outlook, written by Teri McDowell Ott, but it starts on the official start of Advent, December 3. Since we are starting a week earlier, Rev. Christina Thompson from our congregation wrote devotions for that week. Each week we will send you the next seven devotions in a PDF with the "worship email" that goes out each Sunday morning; those devotions will begin that day and run through the following Saturday. If you would prefer a printed copy of them, contact Andrew or Cindy at the church office.

May we find this space of Advent to be the place we can ponder where God is and find the space to wait and watch for the Christ who is coming.

Matthew 25:37-40

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?" ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

As we begin the season of Advent, we expect to read the birth stories of Jesus: the Angel Gabriel coming to Mary, the Angel talking to Joseph, Mary visiting Elizabeth. But no, we don't get those stories for another few weeks. Today we get not only Jesus as an adult, but Jesus as the Son of Man who comes in all his glory and all the angels who are sitting on the throne of his glory. No baby Jesus here.

It is the paradox of Advent and Christmas. We are waiting for the baby Jesus, who actually was born a long time ago. We are waiting for a baby whom we have already welcomed into our own lives every year before this. (This will be my 48th time welcoming Jesus.) Part of this paradox is the realization that we are waiting for Jesus, who is already with us right now, as well as awaiting in hope of Christ's coming in final victory.

So what do we do as we wait for all these things? Jesus tells us to watch for him and to take care of him; to feed, cloth, visit, and see him among the people we encounter.

One year, when I was pastor at Whitney United Methodist Church, I figured out that Jesus does not like carrots. A gentlemen who was hungry came to the church. The church has a feeding program, so there was food to make him a lunch. I asked him if he wanted carrots and he said no, he did not like them. I remember at that moment being reminded that I was encountering Christ and that Christ doesn't like carrots!

As we begin this season of Advent, watch for where you will encounter Jesus.

For Reflection: Where have you encountered Jesus in the past? What did you learn about Jesus in those moments? Ask God to open your heart this Advent season so you might be ready to encounter Jesus.

Breath Prayer (Psalm 100)

Breathe in: Know that the Lord is God

Breathe out: We are his.

Revelation 22:12-13, 17

¹²‘See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. ¹³I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.’ ¹⁷The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come.’ And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

Many of the Christmas songs we will hear talk about snow, trees, Santa Claus, and Frosty the Snowman. The Advent songs we will sing in church talk instead about waiting, watching, preparing, and Jesus’ coming. Of the 25 Advent songs in our hymnal, 15 specifically use those words. They say to us “Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus,” “O Come, O Come Emmanuel,” “For you, O Lord, My Soul in Stillness Waits,” “Wait for the Lord.” All of these hymns remind us of what this season is all about. This space to not run around, cross things off our to-do list, fret over what needs done. It is the season to wait, to invite Christ to come, to watch for where God is amongst us, to watch for where God is coming.

There is a gift in these instructions. Our job during Advent is to simply wait, watch, prepare, and let Christ come as Christ will. The scripture from Revelation also reminds us that Christ is coming. It calls us to say “Come.” So may we say with hymn writer Charles Wesley, “Come, thou Long-expected Jesus, born to set thy people free; from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in thee.”

For Reflection: Pray Hymn 92 today. “While we are waiting, come; While we are waiting, come. Jesus our Lord, Emmanuel, while we are waiting, come.” (words by Claire Cloninger)

Breath Prayer (Hymn 90 and Psalm 27)

Breathe In: Wait for the Lord,

Breathe Out: whose day is near.

Breathe In: Wait for the Lord

Breathe Out: Be strong; take heart!

Tuesday, November 28

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. ³Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

I have read the first chapter of Genesis so many times I almost have the beginning memorized. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was a formless void and the wind swept over the waters. Then God said, let there be light and there was light.” Or something close to that. But this time, when I read it again, I noticed the presence of the darkness. We tend to assume darkness is bad, and certainly there are references in scripture to back that up. But in this creation story, God separates the light from the dark and then names them both. God does not throw darkness out, banishing it to the outer limits. God names it, as he names light, sky, earth, and so on. And without the darkness, God would have no place to put the stars and moon.

This is the time of year when we notice the darkness that feels all around us. It was not so long ago that it was still light at 9:30 p.m. But today, as I write this, the sun will set at 5:18 p.m.; by December 21, it will set at 5:11 p.m. We are actually pretty lucky to be at the western edge of the Mountain Time Zone. In Moscow, in the Pacific Time Zone, the sun will set today at 4:12 p.m., and by December 21, it will set at 4:02 p.m.

It is not just lack of daylight that feels dark, but the world we live in feels dark: Wars in Israel and Ukraine, the political fighting in our country, the workers' strikes, those who struggle with housing, food, employment, etc.

During Advent, we are asking questions: Where is God? Is God here? The creation story tells us that God is in both the light and the dark. God is in the places where things feel as if they are going well and are full of light as well as the places where it feels like a struggle and feels very dark. God created light and dark and God is in it all.

For Reflection: Today, notice the light and thank God for it. Then, as the sun sets and the stars and moon come out with the darkness, thank God for the darkness too.

Breath Prayer (Psalm 74:16)

Breathe In: The day and night belong to you.

Breathe Out: You established the moon and the sun.

Wednesday, November 29

Psalm 100

¹Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth. ²Worship the LORD with gladness; come into his presence with singing. ³Know that the LORD is God. It is he that made us, and we are his; we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture. ⁴Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise. Give thanks to him, bless his name. ⁵For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures for ever, and his faithfulness to all generations.

The season of Advent can seem like a very somber season as we talk of waiting, watching, preparing. The sermon topics for this year are pretty heavy, too. Where is God in the homeless camp? Where is God in Gaza and Ukraine? Where is God when we don't know what to do next? It can all feel pretty heavy and not so joyous. In many ways this is on purpose. Advent is similar to Lent, the season before Easter, when we take a deep look within and see where we need God. So this season to prepare for Christ's coming can be a bit on the heavy side.

But I was reminded today, as I looked over scripture for the season, that this is also a time to be joyful. "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; serve the Lord with gladness, come into his presence with singing." (Psalm 100:1,2.)

We can still be joyful as we wait. We can still sing and make a joyful noise as we ponder where God is. We can wait and watch and ponder with a joyous and glad heart. The psalmist reminds us that we can be joyful because God is good. God's steadfast love endures forever, and God has been faithful to all generations. It is in this goodness of who God is that we find joy.

For Reflection: Reflect today on where you have experienced the goodness of God and God's faithfulness. Have there been moments when you have not experienced these things? Sit with those memories for a few moments. Then read the last line of v. 4. Give thanks to Him; bless his name. Give God thanks for how you have experienced God.

Breath Prayer (Psalm 100:5)

Breathe In: For the Lord is good.

Breathe out: God's steadfast love is forever.

Mark 1:1-2

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, “See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

There was an article recently in the *Idaho Statesman* about a new Christmas pop-up bar in downtown Boise called Gatsby’s Mistletoe Magic. It is tucked into a Boise downtown alley with a hidden door, with a green light and a daily password that you have to know to get in. It is a throw-back to the Prohibition era, and it will only be around until December 24. I know there are many who would love this idea. To me it is terrifying. I want to know where I am going and what to expect when I get there.

It occurs to me that God can feel like that to a lot of people. Unknown, hidden, you need the special password to get into God’s holy place.

The whole idea of Advent and Christmas is that God is not hidden and mysterious and one does not need a password to get to God. In Christ, God is the God who comes.

One of my favorite theologians is Carl Carletto. He writes this about God not being hidden.

*God presents himself to man little by little. The whole story of creation is the story of the God who comes. . . . There is indeed one unique moment in His coming: the others were only preparations and announcements. The hour of his coming is the Incarnation. The Incarnation brings the world His presence. It is a presence so complete that it overshadows every presence before it. . . . ‘The invisible, intangible God has made Himself visible and tangible in Christ.’ (From *The God who Comes*, by Carlo Carretto.)*

In Jesus, God is incarnate—embodied in human form. This scripture from Mark reminds us that not only did God come to be with us, God sent someone to show us where the door is and how to get in. “I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way.” That specific person was John the Baptist. But I think God also sends us to help prepare the way of Jesus, to help people know where to find Jesus. We do this often simply with our lives and the ways that we live out the gospel ourselves.

For Reflection: How did you learn about how to access God? How can you lead someone else to find their way to the God who has come? Ponder these words: *‘the invisible, intangible God has made Himself visible and tangible in Christ.’* What does that mean for you and how you live your life?

Breath Prayer (Mark 4:22)

Breathe In: There is nothing hidden.

Breathe Out: It will all be revealed.

Friday, December 1

Isaiah 11:1-3

¹A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

There is a retreat center outside of Portland that I have been to many times. Part of the property is full of trees, ferns, and other such plants that grow in places with a lot more water than we get here in Boise. It is one of my favorite places to hike in and explore and to experience God. Many of the trees are very old and have lots of moss on them, and some of them have fallen down long ago and are now creating new life. Ferns and moss have grown on these old logs, and in some places new trees have taken root in them, and new trees are growing from an old tree.

The prophet Isaiah talks about a shoot like that: a shoot that shall come from the stock of Jesse and a branch that grows out of his roots. Jesse was King David's father, and according to Matthew 1:1-17, Jesus descends from the line of Jesse and King David. The Hebrew word for root (sheresh) suggests that the root remains alive and sends up a branch out of that root even if the stump is mostly dead. During the time of Isaiah, there was a prophecy that an earthly king, seen as the Messiah, would be on the throne of King David from the root of Jesse. This is a promise that this messianic king would be born of King David's family line as told in the scripture above, even though the remnant of Jesse's family would barely survive.

The Spirit of God would be upon this messianic king, and he would be filled with wisdom and understanding. Over time this messianic king was understood to be Jesus. What seems like a dead and decaying stump brings forth new life in the Messiah, Christ Jesus.

It is a lot like those tree stumps I love to explore. The tree or stump is seemingly dead, but out of it new growth has come. Jesus has come out of that seemingly dead stump of the line of Jesse and brought life and hope then—and still brings life and hope to our world now.

For Reflection: Where do you see new life in our world where there once was just a dead, decaying stump? Where do you see life and new hope in your life that comes from Christ Jesus?

Breath Prayer (Isaiah 11:2)

Breathe In: Come, spirit of wisdom and understanding

Breathe Out: Come, Spirit of counsel and might.

Colossians 3:12-15

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful.

I love when summer turns to fall and I can put away my summer clothes and pull out my sweaters. I love cardigans that I can layer with a long-sleeved shirt and wrap around me especially when I get cold. There is just something comforting about a favorite sweater. It literally feels like I am putting on and surrounding myself with comfort.

So I resonate with the image that is presented here. We are chosen by God to live a life of love, and God gives us our wardrobe to wear. I see these as sweaters we are called to wear—compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience.

The world we are currently living in wears very different clothes. Meanness, arguing, being me first, stocking up riches, and punishing anyone who gets in the way seems to be the new wardrobe of life. As followers of the God who created and loves us, we are called to dress differently: to be kind to people, to be compassionate, to be humble and put others first, to live in quiet strength that comes from God, and to be disciplined.

But regardless of whether we wear these sweaters, we are to put on our basic, all-purpose garment of love. We are to wear love. Every day. Wherever we go, whatever we do. We are to wear our all-purpose garment of love.

These are images that are easy to understand and often I actually imagine that I am putting on my all-purpose coat of love. But it is not always easy to keep the coat on. Imagining putting on my coat of love is especially helpful when I am not feeling very loving. God doesn't say to us to put this garment on when it is convenient or comfortable, but to wear it all the time.

This season of Advent is a good time to practice putting on our sweaters of compassion and kindness, to put on our sweaters of humility, meekness, and patience. And then to make sure we put on our God-given coat of love. Imagine what the world would be like if we all wore our coat of love.

For Reflection: Are there garments you need to take off? Imagine taking them off and exchanging them with God for clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, and patience. Then ask God for your coat of love. Imagine putting it on every day of Advent.

Breath Prayer (Colossians 3:12, 14)

Breathe In: I am God's beloved.

Breathe Out: I am clothed with love.

Apocalyptic Advent

Embracing *Hope* in the
Second Coming of Christ

Advent devotions by *Presbyterian Outlook* editor Teri McDowell Ott

Introduction:

To describe the turbulence and the feelings of our current age, American anthropologist Jamais Cascio coined the acronym BANI: Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, Incomprehensible.

Brittle: Systems and structures we thought were stable (our democracy, our economy, our sacred and secular institutions) feel as if they are on the verge of collapsing.

Anxious: Change is occurring rapidly, and options feel limited. We don't know what to do or which way to turn.

Non-linear: Life is not progressing as we thought it would. People are deciding not to have children, civil rights are being rolled back and environmental crises consistently disrupt rhythms of life.

Incomprehensible: Human behavior is baffling. Why do people buy into conspiracy theories? Why is science ignored? Why does injustice go unaddressed? Why can't we agree on common-sense solutions to gun violence? We don't know and can't predict what's going to happen next.

This Advent you, like me, may be wondering how to live in such a time. What does Jesus say to us in a confusing and chaotic time? How can I adapt to this BANI world and prepare for what is coming?

Advent, from the Latin *adventus*, means “coming.” It is the church’s season of preparation, not only for the birth of Jesus at Christmas, but for Christ’s second coming. We often treat Christmas as an end, as if all we are waiting for is the birth of Christ and the opening of presents on Christmas morning. After the living room is trashed, full of ripped wrapping paper, and all Santa’s cookies have mysteriously disappeared, we’ve successfully “done” Christmas. But Christmas is a new hope, not an end. We celebrate Jesus’ first Advent, with an eye toward his second and the way God is actively at work redeeming and renewing our world.

This devotional will highlight and reflect upon apocalyptic passages of the Hebrew Bible, as well as passages in the New Testament that refer to the second coming of Christ. Some Christians use these texts as weapons, stoking fear of end-time judgment in order to convert people to their particular flavor of faith. I’m more interested in the ways people from marginalized communities turn to end-time prophecies for hope in the midst of suffering and struggle. These voices, along with biblical scholars who rightly assert that apocalyptic texts must be read with an understanding of the



historical and cultural context in which they were written, will be the ones this devotion draws on. I'll include a list of recommended study resources at the end.

When suffering looms large and we are overwhelmed by the problems of our world, what can we learn from texts that turn us to the future? What can these texts illuminate about the ways we can and should move through our current context? How can these texts prepare and inspire us for a new beginning come Christmas?

Let's get started and see where God's Spirit leads.

With faith in the One who has come and is coming,

Teri McDowell Ott



Isaiah 64:1-2

1 O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence — 2 as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil — to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

Jewish apocalyptic thinking was born after the Israelites returned from exile but were still living under the thumb of the Persian empire. They long for liberation and wonder what their future holds. Isaiah begins to answer these questions with prophetic visions of how God will intervene in history, correcting evil, and creating a new, just order.

In Isaiah 64, the Israelites are at a breaking point, and they cry to God for urgent and immediate intervention.

Recall a difficult time in your life when you knew you needed help, when life had given you more than you could handle and your limits were exposed.

When I am in such a place, I feel like a shard of glass — like I'll cut someone who bumps into me. Cranky and irritable, I take out my stress on those closest to me. What I should do, yet oftentimes forget, is turn to God in prayer.

"Come down!" the Israelites ask God. I can relate. We don't need a distant God in these moments of overwhelm, but a God who will stand in the shattered pieces of our lives. We need an intervention. We need a God who knows our enemies and will face them. We need a God who cares enough to act urgently on our behalf.

This recognition of our need is a faithful step in the right direction. We are not God. We have our limits. We cannot solve all our problems alone, nor does God expect that of us.

For Reflection: When have you prayed an urgent prayer for God's help? From where or what did that prayer emerge? What did it feel like to pray for God's help? What — if anything — did it shake loose in your soul? What does acknowledging your need do for your faith?

Breath Prayer (Psalm 40:17)

Breathe In: Do not delay, my God.

Breathe Out: You are my help and my deliverer.



Isaiah 65:17-18

17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

God hears us and answers. Isaiah 65 testifies to this as God answers the Israelites' cry for help, revealing the plan: a new heaven, a new earth that will bring such joy and delight to God's people, memories of past suffering will fade away and be forgotten.

Recall a time in your life when a new joy overcame or transformed a pain of the past.

I recall the moment my newborn baby was placed in my arms after excruciating labor and delivery; when I transitioned to a new call in ministry, leaving behind a painful place that simply wasn't a good fit. In an everyday context, I feel this release into joy when I intentionally schedule a tiny adventure to relieve the stress of work — a visit to a new art museum, a new trail to explore with my dog, a new friendship to nurture over coffee. We can see these transformations as acts of God's creative work — a part of the plan. God does not desire our suffering. God hears, God acts, God creates anew on our behalf.

For Reflection: What new creation has brought joy to your life? In what ways has a new creation helped you move forward, setting aside and healing from pains of the past? What new creation would you welcome this Advent? What would you need to do to prepare yourself to receive this new joy?

Breath Prayer (Isaiah 55:12)

Breathe In: You shall go out in joy,

Breathe Out: and be led back in peace.



Isaiah 65:24-25

24 Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent — its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord.

This text recycles verses from Isaiah 11:6-9, often read at Christmas. Here, in Chapter 65, God promises to follow through on creating a new order where natural enemies like the wolf and lamb will coexist peacefully, share their resources and no longer be tempted to hurt or destroy.

Are we supposed to take this literally?

I confess I am a sucker for animal reels on Instagram that defy the natural order: cats and dogs snuggling together; lions wrestling playfully with the human who rescued them; June, a raccoon saved as a baby, and her best friend, Waffles, a playful Vizsla hound. Examples like these make me wonder what might be possible for us humans, and society itself, if people's needs are met and caring for each other becomes the natural order.

We are quick to give up on God. Quick to say something is “impossible” before looking for examples that prove otherwise. God's plan for our future includes a world where hurt and destruction cease because enemies have become friends. If we hold this vision before us, and believe in its possibility, wouldn't that shape our current reality? Wouldn't that change how we see those we perceive as enemies and the walls we build between us?

For Reflection: When have you witnessed a disruption in creation's natural order? What questions arise from these examples? How can we make space for the possibility of God's creative work? What do we need to adjust about our assumptions of what is possible for God?

Breath Prayer (Isaiah 11:6)

Breathe In: The wolf shall live with the lamb,
Breathe Out: the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
Breathe In: the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
Breathe Out: and a little child shall lead them.



Daniel 7:1

In the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, Daniel had a dream and visions of his head as he lay in bed. Then he wrote down the dream.

The Book of Daniel is the earliest apocalyptic literature in the Bible and the only apocalyptic book in the Hebrew scriptures. Now, we think of apocalypse as catastrophic destruction, but the word comes from the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning “unveiling” or “revelation.” Although this text refers to the first year of King Belshazzar of Babylon, scholars date the Book of Daniel as written during the post-exile period of Jewish history, 168–165 BCE, when the Israelites were living under the arrogant Greek ruler, Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The Jews were prohibited from practicing their religion, persecuted and killed. The Greeks even set up a shrine to Zeus in the Jewish temple. This persecution eventually sparked the revolt led by Judas Maccabeus.

Daniel is a first-person character assumed by the author (or authors) of this biblical book, whose purpose in writing is to encourage his fellow Jews as they suffer under a hostile government. Chapter 7 is a central passage in Daniel, where our protagonist dreams of a violent and arrogant beast (perhaps representing Antiochus IV Epiphanes) being destroyed.

What images fill your dreams?

The Marrow Thieves by Indigenous writer Cherie Dimaline is a harrowing tale of a post-climate change future. On a devastated earth, “schools” are once again being built by White people desperate to get back what Indigenous people kept — the ability to dream. Reading *The Marrow Thieves* led me to contemplate the way our dreams contribute to our hope and our humanity.

Daniel’s dream conjures an alternative vision for the persecuted people of Israel, a dream where the power structure is flipped, and the persecutors become the persecuted. The dream protects us from fatalism, or a paralyzing cynicism. It encourages us to keep living and keep moving, no matter the circumstance of our current reality.

For Reflection: What dream do you have for your future? For your family’s future? For society’s future? What effect do these dreams have on your current reality? Imagine: what it would be like without the ability to dream?



Breath Prayer (Joel 2:28)

Breathe In: I will pour out my spirit

Breathe Out: on all flesh

Breathe In: your sons and daughters shall prophesy,

Breathe Out: Your old men shall dream dreams.



Daniel 7: 7-8

7 After this I saw in the visions by night a fourth beast, terrifying and dreadful and exceedingly strong. It had great iron teeth and was devouring, breaking in pieces, and stamping what was left with its feet. It was different from all the beasts that preceded it, and it had ten horns. 8 I was considering the horns, when another horn appeared, a little one coming up among them; to make room for it, three of the earlier horns were plucked up by the roots. There were eyes like human eyes in this horn, and a mouth speaking arrogantly.

The first readers of Daniel would have understood the wild images of this text as symbols. Scholars believe the beast in Daniel's dream represented the oppressive Greek ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Antiochus was eccentric, power hungry and controversial — the empire grew unstable under his unpredictable reign.

Daniel's dream reflects the Jews' reality: someone is in power over them whom they do not trust and certainly has not earned their respect. We can probably also think of leaders for whom this description fits — leaders who stomp around, asserting their power over others, flashing great teeth in fake smiles while arrogant words fall from their lips.

How do you define power?

In his book *You're More Powerful Than You Think*, Peter Liu defines power as “the capacity to ensure that others do as you would want them to do.” If this definition makes you cringe or leaves a bad taste in your mouth, Liu invites you to get over it. “Power is no more inherently good or evil than fire or physics. It just is,” Liu writes. “The only question is whether we will try to understand and harness it.”

Apocalyptic texts arise in contexts of suffering, to empower the oppressed. People, even ordinary people under the thumb of cruel leadership, have the power to resist evil and empire. Daniel's dream reminds his people that God is in this struggle with them. It's a dream that helps coalesce the people around a common vision of hope for their future.

For Reflection: Where have you witnessed abuses of power? Where have you witnessed power used for good? What power do you hold in your family, your place of work, your church, your community? In what ways can you share your power to promote what is good and faithful?



Breath Prayer (Joel 2:13)

Breathe In: Return to the Lord, your God,

Breathe Out: for he is gracious and merciful,

Breathe In: slow to anger.

Breathe Out: abounding in steadfast love.



Daniel 7: 13-14

13 As I watched in the night visions, I saw one like a human being coming with the clouds of heaven. And he came to the Ancient One and was presented before him. 14 To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed.

Daniel's dream includes God sending "one like a human being" — which can also be translated, "one like a son of man" — to serve as a new king. This new king's arms are open to "all peoples, nations, and languages." His power is eternal and indestructible.

Christians will want to read Jesus' narrative into this vision, but it's important to remember Daniel's Jewish audience. The brutal regime under which they suffered led to a renewal of messianic expectations in Judaism where a king will be sent by God to bring about the end of the age, thus creating a new world order. This vision of God's intervention into their current suffering brought great hope to the persecuted Jews.

God's sending of a savior king is not an excuse for God's people to sit back and live however they please. Daniel encourages faithfulness for today, even as we look forward to God's intervention in the end. We are to bear witness to the transformation that is possible by living according to God's purposes. Daniel preaches preparation, which we lean into here in Advent. For us Christians, Jesus is the one coming, Jesus is the one God has sent and will send again to intervene.

What will you do to prepare?

For Reflection: How do you imagine God intervening at the end of the age? What images come to your mind, and what feelings do they evoke? How can you bear witness to the transformation God makes possible today?

Breath Prayer: Daniel 7:14

Breathe In: All peoples should serve him.

Breathe Out: His dominion is everlasting.



Mark 1: 6-8

6 Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John the Baptist emerges during a time of social and political tension between the Jewish people and the Roman Empire. Jewish communities are in crisis and look to God to deliver them from their Roman enemies. In the midst of their suffering, wondering about their future, John comes on the scene. In apocalyptic language, he calls the people to examine themselves, repent and prepare for God's coming messenger.

John the Baptist is not subtle or graceful. He fits the mold of "end-times preacher" as a strange disrupter of the norm. He shakes things up by preaching outside the city center, outside worldly power and privilege, in the wilderness where people would not normally go to get their needs met — spiritual or otherwise.

Humans find security in sameness. We treasure routine and find safety in having our expectations met. AI algorithms know what we like and give us more of the same. But when we are entrenched in the way we've always done things, we need to be surprised, shaken or startled to see ourselves and our world anew.

This Advent, how might God be disrupting your norm through strange, sometimes shocking, apocalyptic passages and end-time prophets?

For Reflection: Where might you renew your faith outside your usual place and time? Who might be your John the Baptist? Who is disrupting your norm and provoking you to see yourself and your world anew? Why might God want this for you?

Breath Prayer (Mark 1:2)

Breathe In: I am sending my messenger ahead

Breathe Out: who will prepare your way.



Mark 1:14-15

14 Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15 and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

When we understand Jewish apocalyptic thinking, we better understand Jesus' message and ministry. As a Jew, Jesus knew well the apocalyptic texts of the Hebrew bible. Jesus' message was similar to John the Baptist's: the kingdom of God is near; repent and believe. But John preached of a future event. Jesus says the kingdom of God has come near, already beginning to be revealed through himself as God's agent.

Jesus' birth is the first advent. His ministry announces the second advent when he will return to usher in God's new heaven and new earth.

How do we live in this "in-between" time?

As followers of Christ, we, too, are God's agents in this world. When I imagine God's coming kingdom, I picture our beautiful earth renewed, our oceans clean, our air pure, plants and animals and ecosystems thriving. In this thriving creation, I picture humans living with care and respect for each other and our natural home. I picture us living in peace, honoring the dignity and worth of all God's creatures.

As Jesus proclaimed, God's kingdom is already here. We catch glimpses of it when we witness love, grace and acts of justice. But we have much work to do. In between these two advents, Christians must find and embody the qualities of God's kingdom and begin the work of transformation.

For Reflection: Where have you witnessed God's kingdom already revealed? Where do you see transformative work that needs to be done? How can you participate in God's Kingdom work and Jesus' ministry?

Breath Prayer (Mark 1:15)

Breathe In: The kingdom of God

Breathe Out: has come near.



Mark 13:1-2

1 As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" 2 Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

In the spring of 2016, ISIS destroyed cultural artifacts, ancient sculptures, temples and a 1400-year-old stone monastery in Iraq. I watched this news in disbelief. It was so senseless. Yet such desecration happens all the time: Black churches burned during the Civil Rights Movement; pig's blood thrown on a synagogue's door; Pride flags ripped down and stolen from affirming houses of worship.

What would it feel like to see your sacred space desecrated?

According to international conflict expert Donna Hicks, human beings universally desire to be treated with dignity. Violations of our dignity — deliberate disrespect or destruction of what we hold sacred — inevitably leads to conflict, and often violence.

Chapter 13 is a lengthy speech by Jesus, known as Mark's "Little Apocalypse." As the disciples marvel over the Jerusalem Temple's magnificent architecture, Jesus drops this prophetic bomb: This temple will be destroyed. The disciples are shocked, and rightly so. Who would do such a thing?

I'm not sure how one can be prepared for such a violation, but Jesus' ominous warning is meant to bolster his disciples for what lies ahead. As the leader of a non-violent movement of resistance against the Roman imperial order, Jesus foretells what's coming so they will be prepared to stay the course.

The Romans would, in fact, destroy the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD, a horrendous act along with other brutal, desecrating acts of oppression. But the path of love and justice that characterized Jesus' movement could not be stopped.

For Reflection: When have you witnessed or experienced the disrespect of something you hold sacred? What feelings did this disrespect provoke? How did you respond? Had you been warned this would happen, would you have responded differently?

Breath Prayer (Mark 13:5)

Breathe In: Beware

Breathe Out: that no one leads you astray



Mark 13:26-27

26 Then they will see 'the Son of Man coming in clouds' with great power and glory. 27 Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

The climax of Jesus' apocalyptic speech in Mark describes God's final gathering of God's people and is meant to reassure that, despite their suffering, God is ultimately in control. The hardships will not last forever; they must continue in the struggle to establish a righteous and just society, in opposition to Roman imperial order.

There is no greater suffering than that endured alone. Communities build strength and solidarity. During the Civil Rights Movement, Black Americans gathered in churches to fortify themselves with the inspiration needed in their struggle for freedom.

On April 3, 1968, in Memphis, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke to a few thousand people and described how, during their campaign in Alabama, hundreds of people gathered day after day in Birmingham's 16th Street Baptist Church before moving out to face the dogs and fire hoses police unleashed on them.

King preached: "And we just went on before the dogs and we would look at them; and we'd go on before the water hoses and we would look at it, and we'd just go on singing 'Over my head I see freedom in the air.'"

King was assassinated the next day. But his faith continues to inspire people in the struggle for justice and freedom. King's last public words to his gathered people were:

"[God's] allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land ... I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

For Reflection: How has God sent you support in the midst of suffering? What did this support feel like? How did it help? What did the future look like knowing you had God's support?

Breath Prayer (Mark 13:27)

Breathe In: Then he will send out the angels

Breathe Out: and gather his elect.



Matthew 10:34

34 “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.”

Matthew’s apocalyptic imagery resonates with his Jewish audience’s end-time vision of a divine order that will ultimately overcome the injustices of the world. The image of Jesus returning with a sword is difficult to reconcile with our image of Christ as our Prince of Peace. But oppressed people have historically turned to such victorious (and oftentimes violent) visions for help to survive their suffering.

Allan A. Boesak, a South African anti-apartheid theologian, writes in *Comfort and Protest* “apocalyptic literature always appears against a background of persecution and suffering, during a transition from one period of history to another. It is always meant as comfort, encouragement, and inspiration for people in times of dire stress and great difficulties.”

Matthew 10:34 is part of the “Missionary Discourse” — the second of five major speeches of Jesus in Matthew. In this speech Jesus is preparing his disciples for the suffering that will inevitably come – harassment, rejection, family conflict, personal sacrifices, and martyrdom – and that they are most likely already experiencing. The cost of following Jesus is clear.

How has your life of discipleship led you into struggle and suffering?

Many of us live protected from the kind of suffering and struggle about which Allan Boesak wrote. Yet as Jesus’ disciples, we are called toward the suffering, not away from it. We are called to know the names of the poor and the marginalized, and called to resist systems that oppress. Too often we placate and pacify our faith, excusing ourselves from the struggle, avoiding the uncomfortable challenges Jesus poses. We must work with God to redeem and transform our world — a hoped-for vision that won’t become real if we keep our distance.

For Reflection: How has Jesus called you to draw close to the suffering and struggling in your community? In your world? How have you responded? What is your hoped-for vision of transformation amid such suffering?



Breath Prayer (Mark 13:39)

Breathe In: Those who lose their life for my sake

Breathe Out: will find it.



Matthew 13: 24-26

24 He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. 26 So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well."

In Jesus' parable of the wheat and weeds, the field hands quickly identify the weeds that rise from the soil. But in real life, weeds are not so easy to distinguish.

Dandelions are classified as perennial weeds, yet they can be eaten raw or cooked and are rich in vitamins A, C and K. Wherever dandelions grow, children are picking and playing with them, holding them underneath each other's chins to see if they like butter, gathering scruffy bouquets to proudly present to their mothers. Does a weed in the lawn become a flower in a vase?

Gardening in God's field is complex. Weeds and wheat grow together, become entangled, mingle roots and sprouts. Good and evil plants are as difficult to distinguish in God's field as they are in human lives and complicated societal problems. Potential for evil lives within each of us — as well as the potential for good: acts of love, justice, mercy, kindness.

In interpreting this parable, which is full of dramatic and ominous symbols, it's important to remember Matthew's context. Matthew is writing to encourage and inspire an people who are no longer confident that Jesus will be returning soon. Written later than the Gospel of Mark, which calls for urgency in light of Christ's imminent return, Matthew's audience is living with the delay of Jesus' second coming. Jesus' parables in Matthew often emphasize a coming day of judgment when the unfaithful will be punished. But that day is not now, in the parable of the weeds. There is time to grow, to repent of our evil doings. There is time for weeds to bear good fruit.

For Reflection: What faith practices help you discern the weeds from the wheat? Prayer? Study? Accountability in community? What practices might be helpful for you to add?

Breath Prayer (Matthew 13:43)

Breathe In: Let anyone with ears listen!

Breathe Out: The righteous will shine like the sun.



Matthew 25:1

25 Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom."

Lauren Olamina is prepared. The fragility of her community in Octavia Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* is clear. She and her neighbors have banded together to protect themselves from the dangers of their post-apocalyptic world, devastated by climate change and social inequity. But Lauren goes one step further, assembling a small survival pack, a go-bag of items she knows she will need — she's just not sure when. An old canteen, clean and full of water. Matches. A change of clothing. Shoes, in case she has to wake up at night and run. Comb. Soap. Toothbrush and toothpaste. Tampons. Toilet paper. Bandages. Pins, needles and thread. Alcohol. Aspirin. Her pocket knife. Dried fruit, nuts and seeds. The notebook full of her musings about God and the meaning of human life.

In his parable about the wise and foolish bridesmaids, Jesus teaches the disciples how they are to prepare for the end of the age. It was customary for wedding guests to wait for the bridegroom at the bride's home. When the bridegroom is delayed, only five of the 10 bridesmaids are prepared with enough oil to keep their lamps lit.

Jesus' disciples must tend to the flame of their faith, to keep their lamps lit with attentiveness, patience and courage. We do not know when the bridegroom will arrive and welcome us to the banquet. We do not know what will happen to distract us or deter us while we wait. We must, therefore, be prepared.

For Reflection: What would you pack in your end-time survival bag? What would help you tend to the flame of your faith? What would keep you on course, and aid you with faithful attentiveness, patience and courage?

Breath Prayer (Matthew 25: 10)

Breathe In: The bridegroom came

Breathe Out: and those who were ready

Breathe In: went with him

Breathe Out: into the wedding banquet.



Matthew 28: 19-20

19 “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

When I ran cross country in college, our coach led us through visualization meditations before big races. We’d spread out on the floor of a carpeted classroom and listen to him talk us through the 5-kilometer course, noting when we would hit a sharp turn, a hill or a straight flat stretch. Once, I got a bad case of the giggles at our coach’s sing-songy voice as he took us *up* the hill and *down* the hill. But visualization is a proven success strategy of sports psychology. Imagining a successful race actually stimulates the same brain regions as the physical performance. The more you mentally rehearse, or visualize your successful performance, the more you lower competition anxiety and increase the likelihood of staying on top of your game.

Matthew’s Great Commission is an invitation to visualize the journey of discipleship and what might be possible before the end of the age. What if all nations, all peoples, not only understood the values of God’s kingdom, but shaped our collective life according to them? How would the end of our age look, feel, smell, sound if God’s people lived with love, care and respect for each other and our natural world? Jesus tells us to keep this vision of our goal in front of us, and Jesus is with us every step of the way. We do not face this road alone.

For Reflection: If you were to visualize your life of faith as a running race, what would the course look like? What obstacles or challenges would you meet? When would the finish line appear and what would it look and feel like?

Breath Prayer (Matthew 28: 20)

Breathe In: Remember, I am with you always,

Breathe Out: to the end of the age.



Acts 2: 4-6

4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. 5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

I have a bad habit of getting so lost in thought or so lost in listening to an audiobook while I am driving that I miss an exit or a turn. Recognizing my mistake comes slowly, like waking from a deep sleep. I look around and feel as if something is off — *What does that highway sign say? Why am I looking at fields of corn instead of the cityscape?* Once it dawns on me that I've gotten lost, I can get myself going in the right direction.

This is also how I understand the Holy Spirit's work in my life. For Luke, the author of both the Gospel ascribed to him and the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit is evidence of the ways in which God's Kingdom is already present and at work in our world. Luke foresees a longer delay of Christ's second coming. But God has not left us alone. After Jesus' ascension, we were gifted with the presence of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The Pentecost passage in Acts 2 reveals the work of the Spirit as ever-expanding, a drawing together of diverse peoples. Division, tribalism, exclusivism all run counter to the Spirit's work. Do you feel troubled by a broken relationship? By division in the church? By evidence of bias within a community or your own heart? God's Spirit moves within and around us to let us know when we have gone off course. We can turn around, make amends and get back to the transformative work of making our world like God's coming kingdom.

For Reflection: When have you recognized you'd taken a wrong turn in faith? What led you back? What does the Holy Spirit's guidance feel like to you?

Breath Prayer (Acts 2:4)

Breathe In: All of them were filled

Breathe Out: with the Holy Spirit



Romans 8: 22-24

22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;

23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen?

Wildfires, hurricanes, tornados, floods. Natural disasters regularly disrupt our lives and the whole created order, as the effects of climate change and the desecration of our planet result in more and more suffering. We groan with our earth as we labor through these days, casting our eyes to God for help and hope.

Paul, writing to the church in Rome, is a bearer of good news. God plans to bless us and all nations, to save us from our sins, to restore and renew the earth. Jesus, the Messiah, is the one through whom God's plan begins and ends. After Jesus' death and resurrection, Paul implores us to look forward with hope and to wait with patience. Christ is coming. God's plan will be fulfilled.

How do you define hope?

Imprisoned for protesting injustices by Czechoslovakia's communist government, Václav Havel describes hope as a lifeline. In *Disturbing the Peace*, Havel writes: "Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul; it's not essentially dependent on some particular observation of the world or estimate of the situation. Hope is not prognostication. It is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart ..."

Even though we cannot "see" what is ahead of us, orienting ourselves to hope gives us strength. More than mere optimism, hope in God's plan influences and shapes the way we live. We are courageous today, less tempted to give in and give up, because we have hope for tomorrow.

For Reflection: In what ways have you groaned with pain and suffering? In what ways have you witnessed creation groaning? What does Paul's good news mean to you? What role does hope play in your life?



Breath Prayer (Romans 8:24)

Breathe in: In hope

Breathe Out: we [are] saved



1 Thessalonians 4:15-18

15 “For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. 16 For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. 17 Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. 18 Therefore encourage one another with these words.”

Thessalonians 1 is the earliest of Paul’s letters, but already Christians were growing impatient that Jesus had not returned, concerned that members of their community who had died would miss the second coming and life in God’s eternal realm. Paul tells them not to worry; both the living and the dead will rise in glory upon Jesus’ return.

This text, which describes people being “caught up in the clouds,” has been used as the foundation for belief in the Rapture. Introduced in the 1830s by Irish preacher John Nelson Darby, this interpretation was popularized by the 1990s *Left Behind* novels. Darby preached that Jesus would return to earth and snatch all true believers up to heaven, after which there would be seven years of tribulation and destruction before Christ came again.

But a careful reading of 1 Thessalonians 4 doesn’t support this idea, and most mainline church scholars have dismissed the Rapture as unbiblical. N.T. Wright is one of the biblical scholars who critiques the Rapture as “escapist” theology. It’s easy to deny the needs of our planet, and each other, if all will one day be destroyed — and you get “raptured up” before things get real bad. The community of believers plays an important role in Paul’s end-time theology. We are to cooperate with God in transforming the world, not escaping from it.

For Reflection: Have you heard someone speak about their belief in a “rapture?” How did they support their belief? What do you think inspires this belief? What does this belief support?

Breathe Prayer (1 Thessalonians 4:18)

Breathe In: Encourage

Breathe Out: one another



1 Thessalonians 5:1-2, 6-8

1 Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. 2 For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. 6 So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; 7 for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. 8 But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation.

With two hours left to drive before reaching my hotel for the night, my headlights catch the sign of a passing billboard, “Jesus is coming, are you ready?”

I grab the bag of M&M’s next to me in the passenger seat — my stay-awake sustenance.

A night-time drive is a better metaphor for the Christian life, I think, than waiting fearfully for a thief. But Paul wants us alert and awake, and he probably thinks the imagined thief will spike us with adrenaline. He’s not wrong.

Paul and the Christians in Thessalonica anticipated Christ’s return in their lifetimes. They are surprised the day of the Lord hasn’t yet come and they’ve grown impatient and weary. Paul’s message to them is to find sustenance and strength for the journey.

Chocolate’s caffeine and sugar are great for a short trip, but Paul suggests faith, love and hope for a long haul. I appreciate his advice. Without faith, love and hope, I’d certainly lose my spiritual way, and the world would grow so dark it’d be tough to find good reason to continue. Faith, hope, and love are worth living for ... and waiting for.

For Reflection: What sustains you in faith? What do you hope God has in store for us down the road? How would you encourage someone who has grown impatient and tired in their journey of faith?

Breath Prayer (Galatians 5:22)

Breathe In: The fruit of the Spirit is

Breathe Out: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness.



Revelation 1:9-10

9 I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. 10 I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet 11 saying, "Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea."

During a visit to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Texas, I entered an exhibit by Japanese contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama. Once inside a mirror-lined room, the door closed, encasing me in darkness. Before my claustrophobia got the best of me, small yellow lights – floating in the air, at my feet, on the ceiling – cycled on and off. I was surrounded by darkness and light, floating in an alternate universe, experiencing a disorienting yet beautiful alternate reality. Kusama constructs her “Infinity Mirror Rooms” for people to not just observe art, but become a part of it.

We conclude our Advent devotions by stepping inside the final book of the Bible. Revelation is a disorienting book, full of fantastical images – a seven-headed beast, red dragons, lakes of fire, a rider on a white horse – that seem more suited for a fantasy novel than a book of the Bible.

In his book *Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation*, Bruce M. Metzger writes that Revelation appeals primarily to our imagination. Unlike Paul's letters that appeal to our intellect, or the Psalms that appeal to our emotions, Metzger describes Revelation as a series of word pictures that we are meant to experience like an exhibit at an art museum.

John, exiled to the island of Patmos, wrote Revelation for the seven churches listed in verse 11. Scholars agree the language is symbolic, with the beast representing the barbaric Roman Empire. Like the apocalyptic literature we have already read in this devotion, John writes to encourage and reassure suffering Christians by appealing to their imagination. Let's step inside John's alternate reality. Maybe we, too, can find hope for what lies ahead.

For Reflection: How has your imagination served you during a difficult time? If you were to build an art exhibit representing Christ's second coming, what would it be like?



Breath Prayer (Matthew 28: 20)

Breathe In: God is with me

Breathe Out: to the end of the age.



Revelation 5: 6-9 Devotion

6 Then I saw between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered... 8 When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell before the Lamb... 9 They sing a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation."

Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walked Away from Omelas" is a haunting, philosophical tale. The people of Omelas are living their best lives. Festivals with smiling, dancing people fill the streets of this ideal city.

The catch? This utopia depends upon the suffering of one child, locked away in a basement broom closet. Every resident of Omelas knew of and was bothered by the suffering of this child. But they also understood that their happiness was tied to this child's suffering. One sacrificed for the good of the many.

In Revelation, John writes of the slaughtered Lamb, ransomed for the redemption of God's people. John's Lamb clearly symbolizes Christ and his crucifixion. This thinking – that God sacrificed Jesus for the good of God's people – is a Christian concept known as "substitutionary atonement." Christ's death atones for the sins of humanity. Understanding that Christ had to suffer and die for our salvation has influenced the way we understand human suffering.

In *Can I Get a Witness: Reading Revelation through African American Culture*, Brian Blount describes how atonement theory has been used to justify suffering. The most vulnerable people easily become suffering surrogates for the salvation of all. In introducing Black slaves to Christianity, White Americans urged them to see their suffering as a Christ-like sacrifice, their faithful duty for which they would be eternally rewarded.

Womanist theologian Delores Williams counters this kind of thinking by suggesting that Jesus' crucifixion is a reminder of what can happen to those who challenge the powerful and try to help usher in a new order of love and justice. Blount follows, writing, "a life committed to social transformation will entail struggle and perhaps even great suffering. They are not, however, a call to suffer." These theologies understand suffering as wrong, and a result of human misconduct. They avoid theological scapegoating and prompt us to work with God in transforming the world.



At the end of Le Guin's story of Omelas, we read about the ones who walked away from a "utopia" dependent upon the suffering of a vulnerable child. This Advent, as we prepare for the birth of Jesus, we might contemplate the world we want to build with God, for the Christ child, and for all of God's children.

For Reflection: When we are suffering, people often tell us, "Everything happens for a reason." What reason would God have to make good people suffer? Imagine what our world would look like without suffering?

Breath Prayer (Psalm 46:1)

Breathe In: God is my refuge

Breathe Out: a present help in trouble.



Revelation 6: 9-10

9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; 10 they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?"

Certain kinds of violence I can't stomach. I cannot watch shows like "The Handmaids Tale" that depict sexual violence against women. Cruelty towards children leaves me with nightmares. And visions of my loving God turned vengeful warrior shakes my faith to its core. Many biblical scholars condemn the violence in Revelation, saying it reflects the culture and mythology from which it was born and is typical of apocalyptic literature. These seem like good enough reasons to reject the violence of Revelation, to skip over chapters 6 through 9 where God leads a vengeful war against those who opposed Divine purposes.

On the other hand, as a White woman of privilege, I must take seriously the way marginalized people find help and hope in these passages, even if it disturbs my comfort and my image of God.

Reading Revelation through his context as a Black South African who endured apartheid, Allan A. Boesak is impatient with those who condemn its violence:

"People who do not know what oppression and suffering is react strangely to the language of the Bible. Christians who enjoy the fruits of injustice without a murmur, who remain silent as the defenseless are slaughtered, dare not become indignant when the suffering people of God echo the prayers of the psalms and pray for deliverance and judgment."

"How long, Lord?" Boesak says this cry for vengeance has been raised by the suffering throughout the ages. Revelation is read as God's response: God hears their cries and acts to make things right.

This Advent, as we anticipate Christ's second coming, we also anticipate the end of human suffering and the consequences of sin. For even if we can't justify Revelation's violence, we can understand the violent consequences of sin. As Boesak writes, "Greed and selfishness threaten not only a few in a certain area but are an onslaught on God's purposes for the whole world." Let us pray, *How long, Lord?* with the faith that God hears the cries of God's people and acts to make our world right.



For Reflection: What suffering has led you to cry, *How long, Lord?* Where have you caught glimpses of God at work in the world? In your life? In the life of others?

Breath Prayer (2 Samuel 22:7)

Breathe In: In my distress I called to God.

Breathe Out: My cry came to God's ears.



SUNDAY, DECEMBER 24, CHRISTMAS EVE

Revelation 21: 1-4

21 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." 5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See I am making all things new."

Whether or not they've attended church all year, people pack sanctuaries on this holy evening to sing hymns of joy and light candles in hopeful anticipation of Christ's birth. Whenever I have led Christmas Eve services, emotion catches in my throat as I leave the gathered with the benediction's words of blessing. Each flame burns brightly on its own, but it is the collective candles that illumine the dark sanctuary, transforming the room and filling our hearts with hope.

Christmas is not an end, but a new beginning, a new hope! With the birth of Christ, we look forward to the second advent and the day when God will make all things new. This coming new creation is not something to fear. As Revelation draws to a close, we read of a new Jerusalem that "comes down;" God's home is "among mortals."

"God does not make 'all new things,' but 'all things new,'" as New Testament scholar Eugene M. Boring puts it.

God does not come to destroy, but redeem and renew creation.

The culminating vision of John's revelation should lead us to sing our praises a little louder tonight, to make more of a joyful noise. Our God's home is here, among and with us. Tonight, we celebrate our God who comes — first, as a newborn baby, and soon, as our Redeeming Savior.



For Reflection: What does Christ's birth mean to you? How does it feel to gather with others on Christmas Eve for worship? Where do you find hope?

Breath Prayer (Revelation 21:5)

Breathe in: God makes

Breathe Out: all things new.



MONDAY, DECEMBER 25, CHRISTMAS DAY

Revelation 22: 1-2

1 Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

In *The Book of Hope*, Jane Goodall tells of a 500-year-old camphor tree that, miraculously, survived the plutonium bomb dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, near the end of World War II. Jane visited the tree, and her Japanese hosts showed her photos of the absolute devastation after the bomb. Scientists predicted nothing would grow for decades after the nuclear explosion. Jane describes the scene of this miracle: “Its thick trunk has cracks and fissures, and you can see it’s all black inside. But every spring that tree puts out new leaves. Many Japanese regard it as a holy monument to peace and survival; and prayers, written in tiny kanji characters on parchment, [are] hung from the branches.”

Genesis 2:9 describes our first paradise, the Garden of Eden, as being filled with abundant, fruit-bearing trees, and, in particular, the tree of life. Revelation returns us to Eden and to the tree, whose “leaves are for the healing of the nations.” All sorts of tragedy, hardship, and evil deeds have shaped our human story up to this point. But God has the power to transform. This Christmas Day, we begin again, with renewed hope, looking forward to the return of our Savior, and our return to the abundant, healing, resilient tree of life.

For Reflection: Taking the Bible whole, from Genesis to Revelation, what would you say is its overarching theme? Now that we have a vision of how our story ends, how should we live?

Breath Prayer (Revelation 22:2)

Breathe in: The leaves of the tree

Breathe Out: are for healing.



RECOMMENDED STUDY RESOURCES:

Breaking the Code: Understanding the Book of Revelation, Bruce M. Metzger, Abingdon Press, 1993.

Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture, Brian K. Blount, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.

Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse of John from a South African Perspective, Allan A. Boesak, Wipf & Stock, 1987.

The Dawn of the Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology, Paul D. Hanson, Fortress Press, 1979.

Revelation: A Commentary, Brian K. Blount, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Second Thoughts about the Second Coming: Understanding the End Times, Our Future, and Christian Hope, Ronald J. Allen and Robert D. Cornwall, Westminster John Knox Press, 2023.

