



A Season of Hope

*An Advent Guide for Lectionary Year B
from the North Carolina Council of Churches*

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Introduction

The theme for our Advent Guide this year is hope. After considering various themes, we chose hope for the reminder of eternal Hope rather than the spurts of an optimistic outlook. We understand hope as waiting for what is beyond the obvious, a hope that focuses on eternal joy—not joy that is victim to situational or earthly troubles. Our use of hope means the promise of the life and fullness that comes with Christ. We rest and work in our hope of “The Lord has come,” the waiting and receiving of God. We wrote our Advent devotionals around the hope found in the fullness of God.

Our NC Interfaith Power and Light Intern, Sabrina Rosario, starts our guide with this:

Allow yourself to experience the expectation of the arrival of Emmanuel. “God with us,” our Lord stepping into time and space with the sole purpose of fellowship, the mission of getting as close as possible to you. The mystery of living inside you. The arrival of hope.

Colossians 1:27 reads, “*Christ in you, the hope of Glory.*” My native language is Portuguese and the word hope, “*esperança*,” carries the same prefix as the verb wait, “*esperar*.” Having hope means we wait for the Lord Jesus to come and make this world right. We might have heavy hearts and afflicting circumstances, but that baby lying in the manger affirms for us that suffering and tears, inequality and injustice, will not last forever. Their days are numbered!

“Espere, colocando a esperança em Cristo,” Wait and put your hope in Christ . . . Amen.

First Sunday in Advent – December 3

“**B**ut in those days, following that distress, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from the sky, and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of the heavens. Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that it is near, right at the door. Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away. But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come. It’s like a man going away: He leaves his house and puts his servants in charge, each with their assigned task, and tells the one at the door to keep watch. Therefore keep watch because you do not know when the owner of the house will come back—whether in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or at dawn. If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping. What I say to you, I say to everyone: “Watch!”

Mark 13:24–37

On the Sunday we light the hope candle, the Gospel lesson describes “the end of the age.” How appropriate since many of our current events could be read as the end of the age:

- A hostile foreign country influenced our most recent presidential election, not through voter fraud, but by precise infiltration of our news sources (yes, facebook is a news source);
- New government scientific reports confirm what previous environmental scientific reports have been claiming for decades, human behavior is causing climate change—and it’s going to get worse; and
- The renewed threat of nuclear war, which lends a whole new meaning to the end of the age.

Those might be considered “signs” for our modern minds. In today’s gospel reading Jesus has offered some first century Palestine signs, which over the years have captured the imagination of dispensational premillennialists (end of world provocateurs, most famously John Darby). Then Jesus goes on to state the real purpose of thinking about the end of the age. There’s going to be turmoil. It seems to me that Jesus has a lot more to say about the turmoil leading up to the end of the age than he does about the actual end itself. The end of the age is not really the issue; the issue is how we respond to the turmoil. Christianity is less about what happens when we die and more about what happens while we live.

How will we live as sea levels continue to rise, food becomes more scarce, and nations revert to nationalism? Will we live by God’s truth, embodying a countercultural witness to nativism, accumulation of wealth, and military engagement? Consistently, scriptural witness instructs us to welcome the stranger, redistribute our wealth, and devise forms of resistance that do not include violence. This is hard work. It’s far easier to lock our doors (build a wall), repeal consumer protection laws, and drop bombs.

The hope for either of these scenarios is God’s reconciling promise to us. God will have us back either like the lost sheep that God must go and find or the prodigal child who eventually comes home to open arms. One way or another God will gather all of creation into God’s goodness. In the meantime, we choose how to react when turmoil comes our way.

Jesus shows us through his life, death, and resurrection that the possibility for living into God’s promises is limited only by our imagination. Want to enter a world rife with fear and greed—come as an infant born into poverty. Want to upset the military-industrial complicity between nation and religion—refuse to fight. Want to show the all-encompassing reach of God’s love—find your life in losing it for others. We can barely fathom such behavior, but God believes this is who we really are. I hope so . . .

~ Jennifer Copeland

Second Sunday in Advent – December 10

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.[Ⓜ] Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together. For the mouth of the LORD has spoken." A voice says, "Cry out." And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the LORD blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever. You who bring good news to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good news to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid; say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Isaiah 40:1–11

Isaiah 40 is our alarm clock after the rhythm of Ordinary Time; it helps us wake up. Maybe it is more of a jolt awakening—a middle of the night crash that makes you to sit up in bed and look around. This type of brutal rousing might scare us a little, maybe make us gasp, but definitely makes us notice our surroundings. Advent entices all of our senses because the Spirit is moving and preparing the way of the Lord.

In Isaiah 40, we read about the Israelites in Babylonian exile. The people of Judah desperately need the hope of a joyful return to their homeland. These exiled people are distressed until suddenly God comforts the people. Amidst their burnout and fatigue, they hear God.

This passage is for all that feel suffering and pain is abundant. Before the poet shared his consolation from God, the Israelites were about to give up and live as Babylonians. They didn't realize how close hope was.

I wonder if the Israelites felt shocked, suddenly to hear hope, while in desperate exile. Abruptly, the wait is over. Hope seems so much more tangible.

I find it no coincidence that Advent follows a busy season for many of us: the start of a new school year, election season, Thanksgiving, fall sports, and time commitments. We haven't been wandering around aimlessly during Ordinary Time, but now that we are walloped awake, we look around and see our surroundings and have the opportunity to hear God.

I gladly welcome this year's crash in the middle of the night, abrupt wake-up call. In a year of resistance, perseverance, burnout, I cling to God's comfort in Isaiah 40. The Spirit is preparing the way of the Lord . . . Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level" (vs.3-4).

There are sacred and powerful reminders of God's comfort around us—we need to lean in and watch. Hope is closer than it seems to be.

God is here, hope has come. Christ is coming! Christ is near. Christ is with us. We are snapped out of our patterns of fear because a voice cries out! Prepare the way of the Lord!

Prayer: Thank you God for always being with us—
In our exile and fear, you see and hold us.
Help us see your presence so that we feel less alone.
Chaos and injustice are leveled out with your love and mercy.
Thank you for the Hope that your love brings.
Amen.

~ Jessica Stokes

Third Sunday in Advent – December 17

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, “The LORD has done great things for them.” The LORD has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy. Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev. Those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.

Psalm 126

When a conversation with a friend, neighbor, or colleague turns to our current political climate in North Carolina and the United States I have found myself having an increasingly difficult time expressing my emotions in words. It is hard for me to put into words what I feel when I receive a new notification on my phone with the latest news headline. I have often considered turning off the alerts, refusing to remain an informed citizen, and choosing instead to live inside a bubble of ignorance. After all, ignorance is supposedly bliss. But that is a privilege that many of the people I love who live in the margins of our society are not afforded. So I continue to pay attention to the headlines and turn to the Psalms for comfort, because they express the rawest human emotions and help to give voice to my frustration, anger, pain, and despair.

Psalm 126 conjures up images of the Israelites held hopelessly captive in exile in Babylon and in this particular moment many of us can relate. In North Carolina we are held captive by members of our state legislature who insist on choosing their constituents through gerrymandering rather than allowing us, the voter, to choose our elected officials. We are held captive by our fear that our Commander-in-Chief may at any minute tweet something that could spark a nuclear war. Our brothers and sisters who are undocumented are facing exile back to countries that many can hardly remember ever living in. Emboldened white supremacists are attempting to exile people of color by pushing them even further to the edges of society. The freedoms of a growing number of people are being held captive by verbal and physical assaults, bad policing practices, funding cuts to critical social safety net programs, and other immoral legislative policies.

But the Psalms also offer us hope in the midst of our despair and feelings of captivity. Psalm 126 utilizes a lot of group language: we were like those who dreamed, our mouths were filled with laughter, the Lord has done great things for us, we are filled with joy, restore our fortunes. If those in captivity are ever going to be liberated they must resist any and all efforts to divide them. As the saying goes, our liberation is bound together.

The psalmist also reminds us of the importance of continuing to dream. History shows us that dreamers are dangerous to those in power who are determined to maintain the status quo. The story of Joseph in the book of Genesis and the prophetic witness of Martin Luther King, Jr. attest to the potency of dreams. The psalm concludes with the promise that, “those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. Those who go out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with them.”

While it is entirely appropriate to mourn the current state of things and to feel frustration and despair, we must continue to sow seeds. We must continue to show up at marches and protests. We must continue to confront the forces of violence with peace. We must continue to gradually pull back the veil on injustice for one day we will return with songs of joy, carrying our harvest of sheaves from the seeds we currently sow.

Today, we look toward that manger that soon will hold the long awaited Messiah, the Prince of Peace, and we are reminded that while the captivity has been great, so too is the deliverance.

~ **Andrew Hudgins**

Fourth Sunday in Advent – December 24

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.” “How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.” “I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her.

Luke 1:26–38

It is Christmas Eve. The celebration of the birth of the Christ child is imminent. The reality of the child’s arrival is more real than it has ever been; the joy is tangible, but the current reality is messy. It is sweat, tears, groaning. It is pain that overcomes the body. It is anxiety and fear and ceaseless prayer. Hope for the immense potential in this little life that is being born. The water has broken, the labor pains are intensifying, the celebration is nigh. It is near, but not yet. How often in our lives do we yearn for what is to be, while overwhelmed by the current reality?

Our reading for today is of the moment Mary first hears that she is going to have a child. I remember the moment I found out I was pregnant—the simultaneous shock, fear, excitement, disbelief, and amazement at the miracle. How much more must Mary have felt these things to be given the news by an angel? When she “pondered what sort of greeting this must be” I would bet that what the angel said next was not among her wildest imaginings of what he might say, “you will bear a son . . . of his kingdom there will be no end.” Surely this is news that would change everything.

Framing this passage are statements made by the angel and Mary, respectively. The angel's initial greeting ends, "The Lord is with you." Mary's final words to the angel begin, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord." Between these assertions comes the announcement of the coming Christ, the hope of this passage, the hope of the world. This hope, the promise of the coming Christ, is bookended by a reminder of God's presence with us and our presence with God. Like Mary, we need to show up as we are called and say, "Here am I." Between "The Lord is with you" and "Here am I" hope is living.

The ultimate hope of Christ's unending Kingdom and the current reality that the angel proclaims may live in tension, but the angel reminds us that, "nothing is impossible with God." When God shows up and we show up, we are a part of ushering in that hope to be embodied more fully in our world. The birth of the child is imminent. Hope is living as we remember the Lord is with us. Let us respond, "Here am I."

Prayer: God of hope, as we experience exhaustion, suffering, injustice, and pain—as we feel the pangs of labor—let us not lose hope: peace and justice are being born. We know that when we face the insurmountable, we have the hope of the God of the impossible. You are the God of the barren and the virgin conceiving, the God of the power structures of this world being overcome, and You are with us. We are here, ready to do our part. Lead us in your ways, and fill us with hope and joy. Amen.

~ Shannon Axtell Martin

Christmas Eve and Day – December 24 and 25

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

Titus 2:11–14

Every year during the Christmas season, there is at least one film or television program each day that comments on how our consumerism has blinded us to the true meaning of Christmas. Depending on the premise of the movie or TV show, we learn that the “true meaning of Christmas” can be anything from spending time with family to celebrating the birth of Christ. As Christians, we believe that Christmas is a time to celebrate the appearance of God’s grace that brings salvation to all. This grace appeared when God sent Jesus to Earth so that we might have salvation. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9), and it is for every single one of us—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Grace, then, is grace—that is to say, it is sovereign, it is free, it is sure, it is unconditional, and it is everlasting. —Alexander Whyte

So, what does God’s grace do for us? It teaches us that we have to be the just and righteous people God calls us to be, right now, in this time, while leaving our godless and worldly desires behind us. We are to live in the world, not hiding ourselves away. How can we show Christ’s love for us and share it if we separate ourselves from the world?

At the time Paul was writing these words to Titus, Titus was leading a congregation on the island of Crete where the people were known to yield to their worldly desires. The gift of God’s grace quiets and eventually silences such desires. God’s grace instructs us on how to live. We are to live our just and righteous lives out of respect for God’s gift of grace as we await the fulfillment of God’s creation.

This Christmas, when we think of what is truly important, the most valuable gifts we have, the “reason for the season,” let us not forget that God has loved us so much that he gave us an opportunity to be saved and forgiven for our transgressions through Jesus Christ.

And then, what is grace? Grace is love. But grace is not love simply, and purely, and alone. Grace and love are, in their innermost essence, one and the same thing. — Alexander Whyte

Silent night, holy night,
Son of God, love’s pure light
Radiant beams from Thy holy face,
With the dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus, Lord, at Thy birth,
Jesus, Lord at Thy birth.

~ Josie Walker

First Sunday After Christmas Day – December 31

Praise the LORD. Praise the LORD from the heavens; praise him in the heights above. Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his heavenly hosts. Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars. Praise him, you highest heavens and you waters above the skies. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for at his command they were created, and he established them for ever and ever—he issued a decree that will never pass away. Praise the LORD from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do his bidding, you mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds, kings of the earth and all nations, you princes and all rulers on earth, young men and women, old men and children. Let them praise the name of the LORD, for his name alone is exalted; his splendor is above the earth and the heavens. And he has raised up for his people a horn, the praise of all his faithful servants, of Israel, the people close to his heart. Praise the LORD.

Psalm 148

The liturgical season of Christmas comes with expectations; expectations of experiencing hope, joy, peace, and moments of eternity. Sermons tend to be about hope. The Hallmark channel is the go to source for a good cry, some laughter, or, as they tag themselves, for a moment of inspiration. Even the devotionals this time of the year are about the hope and joy of the season. Today, we are one week past the gifts, the meals, the parties, the Christmas plays, food drives, and all the things. Or maybe you're one week past the loneliness of remembering, being on the outside looking in, or missing loved ones who have died. For all the expectations of the season, we may or may not have stood in moments of eternity.

Psalm 148 seems very poignant this week. It doesn't talk about gifts and plays. It doesn't even use the word hope. It is certainly not filled with expectations, but rather with surety. Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD from the earth. Every verse, every line is about creation praising the Creator. It sings hope. Not a temporary kind of hope, not a hope dependent on circumstances, but hope that is oriented toward the faithfulness of the LORD, the Creator of all things. In the order of the universe, from the tiniest fungi to the vast expanse of space, God's care and faithfulness for creation speaks to us. If our hearts and souls are open, we might see the love that brought creation into existence. When we're listening, we stand in a moment of wonder and awe, a moment of eternity.

“I saw a baby bird fly.” The words tumbled from the lips of a five-year-old whose eyes were wide with wonder. One bird, one boy just out of toddlerhood, and I stood in a moment of eternity. An ordinary day and an event that happens every year at different times, in different places; yet this one was pregnant with hope, joy, and wonder. Why was this time different from any other time, this day, this baby bird flying for the first time? I dare say, the observant eyes of a boy whose heart and soul were open to hope and wonder.

Things go wrong. Stories of despair and grief are splashed across the headlines day after day. It's neighbor against neighbor, governments rising and falling, ecological disasters one after another. You would think that hope had gone out of fashion.

And then a baby bird flies.

“Awe enables us to see in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in the small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple, to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal.” – Abraham Joshua Heschel

~ Nicole Johnson

Epiphany – January 6

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: “But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.” After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Matthew 2:1–12

Most people think of the Christmas season as ending on Christmas Day; however, the celebrations of Jesus’ birth do not end on December 25. Following the hustle and bustle of Christmas, we have more time afterward to reflect on the wonders of the Incarnation. Epiphany is the remembrance of the arrival of the Wise Men (and by extension, the celebration of the manifestation of the divine nature of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi). In Spain and other Latin American countries, Epiphany is celebrated as *El Día de los Reyes*, or the Three Kings’ Day.

Differing from celebrations in the United States, this is the highlight of the Christmas season with children receiving gifts they believe are from the Magi, parades in the streets, and families sharing the special *roscón de reyes*, a traditional cake with a representation of the baby Jesus hidden inside. While Epiphany is traditionally a time of celebration and being with family, for many in Latin America and those who have immigrated to the States, this year many families will be separated and living in fear. They are separated by our broken immigration system that thrives on cheap labor from abroad, deports thousands of people, and keeps many incarcerated in private prisons. In a season when we celebrate the light of Christ coming into the world, they live in the shadows.

When I consider the great joy the Magi experienced when they saw the Christ child, the generous hospitality the Holy Family showed them, and the evil anguish of King Herod, I cannot help but think about the concept of home and what the journey of the Magi represents. The Magi were travelers from a foreign land searching for a child, a hope for a better world. It is interesting to note that the Magi only appear in the gospel of Matthew, and are therefore the first example of welcoming the stranger, a theme that is repeated over and over again in the New Testament. Jesus repeats throughout the gospels that welcoming strangers is welcoming Jesus himself, and this is first personified in the welcome of the Magi. Like the Holy Family, we are called to welcome with hospitality and compassion those strangers who arrive bringing unexpected gifts and blessings.

This Epiphany, I pray that all of the many immigrants in our country can find hope and comfort in the midst of their struggles. May we remember the words of Oscar Romero, who was a beacon of hope for the poor and the oppressed and was murdered for his beliefs, as stated in this sermon January 8, 1978 (Epiphany): "As the magi from the East followed their star and found Jesus, who filled their hearts with boundless joy, let us too, even in hours of uncertainty, of shadows, of darkness like those the magi had, not fail to follow that star, the star of our faith."

~Jennie Belle

Baptism of the Lord – January 8

And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Mark 1:4–11

The ancient season of Advent offers Christians an opportunity to enter a space of hopefulness and anticipation. All around us is the anticipation of our Savior's birth, along with the secular demands of the season that most of us get caught up in spite of our best intentions. Then Christmas comes and we celebrate the arrival of Jesus, hopefully with quiet reflection and thankfulness for the gift of Light born into a dark world.

As the seasons of Advent and Christmas wind down and we return to the day to day of our lives, it can be a challenge to keep the Light burning and the hope alive in our hearts. The world of late has seemed pretty bleak. War still rages, innocent people continue to be killed as we debate, we abuse and are quickly destroying the earth God provided. Basic civility appears to be lost.

The words of Mark 1:8: "I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" remind us that though Christians are not exempt from pain and darkness, we have a light within that is eternal and will not be extinguished. We follow the example of Jesus, baptized by John, when we outwardly profess our faith and our intention of walking in the Light. As we move past the joyous Christmas season and into a new year, let us remember our own Baptism and the hope that resides in us. Despite the setbacks that seem never-ending, we are assured by our Creator of the promises to be fulfilled.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace, as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

~ Chris Pernell