



Introduction

The central calling of an Advent ethic is waiting. But this waiting is not a passive or idle activity. The root word for wait is the same root word for watch. Waiting means to watch, to pay attention to what God is doing around us. Waiting means to be alert, to keep awake.

Keep awake to justice; dismantle systemic racism which continues to uneven the playing field. Keep awake to mercy; advocate for those whose voices are stifled by the few over the good of the many. Keep awake to where God is already at work and join in this good work. There is much work to be done and God invites us to join in this good work.

The North Carolina Council of Churches staff offers you this resource as you move into the Advent of another Christian year, a year like all that have gone before it in which God's people strive to be faithful to the call to love God and love our neighbors. We hope these weekly reminders to "Keep Awake" built around the Advent scriptures, grounded in the Council priorities, and spread across the state will enrich your season of expectation.

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First Sunday of Advent – Read Isaiah 2:1-5

War isn't waged only with bullets and bombs, though that is certainly in the news these days. War is also personal with a different arsenal of weapons. Our words. Our lack of words. Even our absence. War isn't always caused by being there; sometimes it's about not being there. But whether we wage war with bullets or words, war is a skill that must be learned. Isaiah says as much. We must study it extensively and practice it rigorously. The only way to move away from waging war is to practice peace more extensively and more rigorously.

One of the prominent features of Isaiah's vision for peace is that we should all practice. We know war is hard to master; why should peace be any easier? We have to be taught the ways of peace and like any acquired skill, we have to practice them over and over and over again to get really good. I used to know the periodic table from beginning to end, but I don't even know the first five elements anymore. I don't use chemistry; I haven't used it since the first week of my freshmen year of college when I went to two lectures, one lab, and the drop-add office in that order. Why do we think it would be any easier for us to retain the lessons of peace—if, indeed, we'd ever learned them—when we don't practice them?

When we come into God's presence and review the grand tapestry of God's mercy throughout history, we can't help but notice its totality: no trouble is beyond the reach of God's mercy, no quarrel is beyond God's reconciliation, no abandonment renders us so helpless that God cannot help. Our lives look very different if we studied those truths more fervently than we study office politics, hone personal grudges, or manufacture weapons of mass destruction. We

would no longer need our swords and spears, literally or figuratively. With God reaching out to enfold us, right along with all the ones from whom we believe our swords will protect us, we will find that we don't need our swords.

The Prince of Peace whose advent we announce today carries no sword or spear. He comes into our midst unprotected knowing that we've all got a sword hidden somewhere that we might use. Most of life is lived in a wide gray area of ambiguity and uncertainty. Sometimes there's a sliver of pure right or absolute wrong on the outer edges where we convince ourselves we might need a sword. But there's only been one who stood with certainty in the place of no ambiguity, the only place where a sword can rightly be put to use. And the one who stood in that place told his followers—and we are they—put away the swords.

You know the story when they came for Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. They came out to arrest him with swords and clubs as if he were a bandit; one of his disciples took a sword and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. But Jesus touched his ear and healed it. And he said, "No more of this."

No more of this. Amen.

Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director

Second Sunday of Advent – Read Psalm 72: 1-17

As people of faith and conscience motivated by an ethical and moral commitment to the truth, we must “stay awake” and deliver the message of Psalm 72 calling upon all who hold power in our society to be filled with the righteousness of love and compassion.

Inherent value resides in the life of each neighbor and every creature and we must be ever mindful of our calling to serve the multitudes of people throughout this nation and the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Within the larger canon of faith traditions many people are committed to making the poor, displaced, and marginalized the focus by which problems and solutions are analyzed. We are, as Dr. King said, “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

On this second Sunday of Advent, may we hold those with power accountable and recognize our own responsibilities amongst the powerful as we live into our faithfulness.

Prayer

Make us worthy, Lord, to serve those people throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them through our hands, this day, their daily bread, and by our understanding of love, give them peace and Joy.

– Mother Teresa

Susannah Tuttle
Eco-Justice Connection Director

Third Sunday of Advent – Read Isaiah 35:1-10

We have all heard Franklin Roosevelt's famous statement during the Depression: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Those words reassured a frightened nation. Unfortunately, fear itself is often enough.

Fear is a motivator and market force. Fear sells guns, car alarms, and security systems. Fear wants to build walls, protect our jobs, protect our country. Fear limits and paralyzes; prevents us from trying something new, stretching, reaching out, and risking. Fear keeps us from speaking up, asking a question, going out for the team, trying out for the part, applying for the job.

Fear prevents us from striving for greatness, from ascending to the highest heights because things feel safer on the ground. Fear reduces the scope of our lives, the extent of our love, the depth of our passion, the generosity of our giving.

It is to a fearful people the prophet Isaiah brings these words of hope and joy. It is a promise of salvation rooted in the words: Fear not. Your God will come and save you.

It takes a good amount of faith to remain vigilant, to keep awake, when there is plenty to discourage you, plenty to fear. But faith does not mean the absence of fear. Faith means doing what you need to do, loving, caring, sharing your passions and gifts, and living a faithful life despite fear. Keep awake, keep living because something has happened that is more real, more pervasive, more powerful, more to be trusted than whatever is to be feared.

God has come among us. God's love is the most powerful reality in the world and in our lives. God's love lives among us and in us. It sustains us even when we are afraid.

Therefore, keep awake and do not fear. Amen.

Sean Allen
Finance and Administrator Director

Fourth Sunday of Advent – Read Matthew 1:18-25

I don't know when it happened or at least when it became one of the first things I do when reading or hearing a story. I don't know why it feels so urgent. When hearing or reading any story my first question is to ask, "Who didn't get to speak? Whose voice do I not hear?"

Matthew 1:18-25 is the first story in Matthew that tells us about the circumstances surrounding the irregular conception and birth of Jesus. In the first few verses we get a genealogy that includes other irregular births, so by the time we get to verse 18, this irregularity is still surprising, but in a way that falls into a pattern. The first thing that captures my attention is that Jesus' conception and birth story were irregular and unexpected for particular people.

Under these circumstances, there were rules to be followed because pregnant, unmarried women weren't supposed to happen if you followed the rules. Joseph found himself in the middle of the irregular and unexpected and then he made a choice that didn't follow the rules at all. No quiet divorce, no rejection of Mary. What captures my attention though is that this first narrative is about the irregularity of Jesus' birth and what his father had to do; not his mother, not the one who would be most adversely affected by being pregnant and not yet married; not the woman/child whom Joseph felt the need to protect by deciding that a quiet divorce would be best.

I think we have a lot of rules about church and religion and how to be faithful. Sometimes the rules don't fit. Sometimes the rules are not big enough for God's grace. I am not anti-rules, but maybe God isn't so much about rules either when the rules don't fit. When the unexpected happens, God

speaks something new throughout the stories of the Old and New Testament over and over and over again. Unmarried woman with child: don't divorce her; create a world with rules and processes: let us make human beings imago Dei; a man paralyzed unable to walk: pick up your mat and walk. We call them miracles when the unexpected happens, when the rules aren't followed, when a new thing happens.

Maybe ministry needs to look like that, working in the unexpected and embracing the irregular when the rules of society aren't big enough for God's grace and love. Fight for the oppressed when the rules would keep them oppressed, open the doors and our hearts when rules would have us reject those who are different, stand with those who are marginalized when the rules create barriers between "us" and "them", change the rules when we have built systems that continue to perpetuate conditions that would have us reject the imago Dei in every human being. Keep Awake.

Nicole Johnson
Partners in Health and Wholeness Co-Director

Christmas Day – Read Psalm 96

By now, you've likely heard Burl Ives encouraging you to have "A Holly Jolly Christmas," or maybe you have joyfully joined in as The Temptations crooned each part of "Silent Night." These Christmas standards and others carefully selected for cantatas and neighborhood caroling aren't on the playlist the psalmist admonishes readers to sing in Psalm 96.

This royal psalm is a call to lift our voices because God is the king of God's people. Thus, this singing should provoke something beyond the excitement that Santa is coming to town. David Bland explains, "Singing to the Lord activates within us a desire to practice the Lord's justice."

Imagine informing family members that this year's after-dinner sing-along will include a melody that calls us to address gun violence, mass incarceration, food and housing scarcity, and other societal problems that cannot be handled entirely by dropping a few dollars in a canister while shopping. Like Psalm 96, this song will be sung not because God is bringing joy to the world but rather because God is bringing judgment to the world.

"What is there to sing about?" some may ask while looking back at our collective and personal struggles of the past few months. Today's text nudges us to sing not because all is well or because we have a perfectly curated Christmas celebration awaiting us. No, we sing with exuberance because God will make all things new, just, and right in our unjust world.

Arlecia Simmons

Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

First Sunday After Christmas – Read Psalm 148

In grand fashion, the psalmist emphasizes the sheer presence of God in our world. The glory and exultation of this passage make it hard to understand how we can forget, or become unaware of God's power. The imagery of deep water creatures, fierce weather, the stars and skies beyond our sight, and all that fills our world – how could we ever need such a reminder of our God?

“Praise the Lord!” is a call to worship, seek, be reminded of, and look for God in our day. If God is involved in our world in such magnificent yet intricate ways, our Creator is with us in our matters, from minute to life-changing.

As we continue to live in unpredictable times and navigate more than what seems possible, there is assurance. Peace is available to us. The psalmist reminds us that the more we seek God, we will become aware of God everywhere. This awareness will sustain us. If we are looking for God's involvement in our world and our lives, we will find a power and peace that makes us whole. This mindfulness gives us strength for whatever God convicts us towards. This awareness helps us in the moments that make up our day and our existence. In our seeking, we can rest, knowing that our day is filled with sacred reminders of a God who knows us and loves us.

We give thanks for a Creator God who has such stunning power yet loves us delicately, supporting us through so many unknowns. Let us seek to notice the sacred ways of God holding us.

Jessica Stokes
Partners in Health and Wholeness Co-Director

Epiphany of the Lord– Read Isaiah 60:1-6

The feast of the Epiphany is one of the oldest festival holidays in Christianity. It is meant to be a time of celebration, as it represents the first manifestation of Jesus Christ's divinity. On that day, the Magi, otherwise known as the Wise Men, came to Jesus with blessings and gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

The Epiphany celebrates the unity between those from different backgrounds—kings of different lands coming together to welcome the Lord. In a time when darkness covers the land, and people's hearts have grown cold so as to not welcome and love our neighbors, we must enrich our spirits with the true message of Jesus Christ: virtues of peace, love, trust, and unity.

In the present, we have come to think of this time of year as a restful transition from the hustle and bustle of the passing advent holidays. In many ways, the day of Epiphany has come to represent a return to normality. However, last year struck a very different tone for January 6th within the United States, as discord ran rampant and political extremes boiled to the surface of our nation.

This year, I ask you to reflect on the true meaning of today, as a day of unity and love. The day that Wise Men reacted to the presence of the Lord with kindness and adoration, rather than violence and anger. In the darkest of times, we are called to follow the Lord. May he lead us away from animosity and uncertainty, and towards times of unity and peace. Even in the darkness of the night, we may dream of love and hope. However, if we are truly to see the light, we are called to take it upon ourselves to make our dreams a reality.

Enlighten our minds and awaken our souls, oh Lord. Let us acknowledge the darkness within our nations and look towards a new dawn, rather than glorify the wickedness of those who seek to live within nightmares.

“Lift up your eyes and look around; they all gather together... Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice” In this same spirit, as people of faith, we are called to come together and see the world in all its turmoil and beauty. If the Lord is to truly welcome our spirits, we must first come to him, gathered as one, with open eyes and love in our hearts.

If these words find you in a dark place in your own life, I only hope that these thoughts may provide comfort and hope for a brighter future.

Ren Martin
Eco-Justice Connection Program Coordinator

The North Carolina Council of Churches

The North Carolina Council of Churches represents 26 distinct judicatories from 18 denominations. We have a proven record of moving ahead of the curve on the social issues of its day even when our position was not popular among the churches or the culture. Shortly after we were founded in 1935, the Council was likely one of the first places in the south where black and white leaders sat together to discuss matters of mutual importance. With each new enterprise, the Council frequently finds itself out in front of where society and the church eventually end up.

While the issues we address mirror the attitude of most progressive organizations around us, we have a singular starting place. We refract everything through the lens of faith drawing. This starting place offers a different tenor to the conversation and can lead to different conclusions without reverting to polarizing opposites.

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