

2024
ADVENT
GUIDE

HOPE
IS
NEAR

A SONG OF RESISTANCE

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





North Carolina Council of Churches

Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

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AN INTRODUCTION

It's not by accident we call the 1st Sunday of Advent, Hope—Hope, not to be confused with optimism. Hopeful living is a very different sort of existence than the culture of optimism promoted around us. Hope rejects the fatalism of the current situation by recognizing that we don't have the right to make that assessment. Just because we can't find any possibility amidst impossibility, does not mean none is there. Where God is present, impossibility is absent.

Hopeful living trusts in God's possibility. Hopeful living changes our perspective, not by overcoming the impossible places in which we sometimes find ourselves, but by placing them within the realm of God's hope-filled future.

The staff of the North Carolina Council of Churches hopes these devotions offered to you for the Advent/Christmas/Epiphany seasons will direct your gaze to the one from whom our hope comes.

*Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director*

FIRST SUNDAY

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-36

In the first week of Advent, we root ourselves in hope while absorbing and sorting out our way forward in the face of threats—political, environmental, and social—and the real struggles of our everyday lives. North Carolina is reeling from the \$53 billion impact by Hurricane Helene in Western N.C. We have an economically and socially tough working environment. And we've weathered an election cycle with the high stakes of selecting the next President, Governor, and Lt. Governor as well as the state's Attorney General, Superintendent for Public Instruction, and multiple General Assembly members.

The words from Luke's gospel resonate with our reality: "Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catches you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape [to grapple with] all these things that will take place . . ." (vv. 34-36).

In the season of Advent, we are called to wait while actively preparing—to "be on guard." It's a matter of both vision and imagination. We lean into hope and show up to do what needs to be done. We strive to live into God's call for holy hospitality.

Paul's instructions for the people of Thessalonica offer further guidance for standing on the solid ground of hope: "May God make you increase and abound in love for

hope: “May God make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may God so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (vv. 12-13).

John Dempsey Parker
Partnerships and Development Director

SECOND SUNDAY

Philippians 1:3-11

After a turbulent political season, the destruction of Hurricane Helene, a lengthy recovery needed for our Western North Carolina neighbors, and an economy that for some may result in fewer gifts under the tree, the Apostle Paul's words invite us to recalibrate. While we are enduring life's trials, it can be hard to fill the "joy tank" Paul so eloquently writes about and encourages the church to refill as it carries out its mission.

Whether we enter this season with the weight of communal or personal burdens, Paul's letter to the Philippians reminds us that we are seen and remembered by God, "and the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion" (v. 6). Even when it seems harder this year to fa-la-la-la and decorate our houses, Paul reminds us that our joy cannot be framed by what is happening around us. Our joy exists because we know the end of the story. Our confidence is in God's work through Christ.

Although we may be tempted to sit out this season, we are invited to allow our joy to overflow and to share it with those who may need a reminder that God is still working in and through us. Joy is still the gift that keeps giving.

Arlecia Simmons

Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

THIRD SUNDAY

Isaiah 12:2-6

This third Sunday of Advent, as Christmas draws closer, we are called to rejoice, even in the face of all that swirls around us. Communities are recovering from devastating floods. War is raging around the world, with escalating conflict in the Middle East and destruction in Ukraine. Deep political polarization is dividing families, churches, and communities. There is fear and uncertainty. And yet, there are also stories of communities coming together to rebuild; we hear the sounds of laughter and children playing; we experience joy amidst the heartache. Experiencing joy doesn't mean we ignore the pain and suffering around us. We choose joy each day as an act of defiance. We choose hope as an act of courage.

“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and will not be afraid, for the Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation” (v. 2). When the prophet Isaiah spoke these words to the people of Judah and Jerusalem, they were witnessing the annexation of their northern neighbors in Israel by the Assyrian Empire. Such an imminent threat creates its own form of political instability, a future that feels beyond our control. Isaiah's proclamation is a challenge to trust God amidst seemingly insurmountable odds. We are called to place our hope in the God who brings salvation, even when the world feels out of control. This trust invites us to resist the culture of fear and scarcity and, instead, live as people anchored in God's promise of restoration and peace.

That to which we remain present and towards which we give our energy, is what will grow within us. Advent calls us to remain present to hope and give our energy to joy. Rather than focus on situations where we feel powerless, we root ourselves in God's promise to dwell with us. Just as Isaiah invited the people of Judah to shift their focus from the power of the Assyrians to the higher power of God, we are invited to shift our focus from the brokenness of the world to the strength of God's saving work. We are invited to sing songs of joy in the face of despair.

“Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel” (v. 6).

Carrilea Hall
Partners in Health and Wholeness Associate Director

FOURTH SUNDAY

Luke 1:39-45, (46-55)

How many times did Mary sing her song? We know she sang it at least this one time, but I wonder, did she sing this song to her new baby every night as a lullaby? Did those around Mary and the baby always know the song? Songs, after all, are powerful. Songs shape us.

Mary's song sings praise for all God has done, is doing, will do – and not just for her. Mary sings for all who benefit from God's love. She praises God for relieving the proud and powerful of their swelled heads and overblown sense of self-importance. She praises God for sending the rich away empty so they might have room in them for more than money can buy. She praises God for mercy and justice. Mary bursts into a song of hope not just for herself, but on behalf of everyone who thinks God has forgotten God's promise to be present with us forever.

It is clear from her song that for Mary, God's hope is connected to justice. This can be a difficult image for us. In our nativity scenes we don't really picture Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a justice figure. Compliant, obedient, servile, humble . . . that's Mary. Mary, Mary, meek and mild. Mary with smooth skin and a blue habit. Not Mary with a copy of Marx's *Das Kapital* under her arm.

And yet here is Mary, the mother of Jesus, singing for justice. Singing about how God has scattered the proud and brought down the powerful from their thrones. Singing about how God has lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Mary is so sure of her hopes that she uses past tense verbs. "God has brought down the powerful" (v. 52).

Mary's song is intimately connected to justice. It is a song that sounds a lot like the stories of Jesus' life. And so, I can't help but think, one of the reasons Jesus taught the way he did, the way Jesus picked some stories to tell and omitted others, the way Jesus talked about the vulnerable and lowly, the way Jesus prophesied on reversing power arrangements so that the powerful in their thrones are brought down while the lowly are raised up – I can't help but think that one of the reasons Jesus taught and lived the way he did is because he had a mother who sang a hope-filled subversive lullaby to him his whole life.

Songs are powerful and they shape our lives. If, for your whole life, you heard this song of God's hope intimately connected to justice, how could it not impact how you lived?

Sean Allen
Finance and Administration Director

CHRISTMAS DAY

John 1:1-14

The irony of discussing light during the time of year when a day has more night than light should not be missed in today's reading. The winter solstice—the shortest day of the year—was a mere three days ago, so we've still got a lot of night on this eve of Christmas. Literally.

Figuratively, it's also fair to say many of us feel surrounded by night, persistent wars across the globe, rebuilding after fall hurricanes, political dis-ease in our nation, just to name some big ones. Then there is the personal night all around each of us known best to each individual living through it.

All the more reason to hear the Gospel truth about light. John's Gospel tells us the light that proceeds from the life that proceeds from The Word that proceeds from God, dwells among us. Even at night.

John fashioned these first few verses of his Gospel to remind us of the first few verses in Genesis. "Don't you get it?" John seems to be saying. The first thing God creates is light. And now, John tells us, the light of creation dwells among us. When we wake with the first light of Christmas Day, slightly earlier than it was three days ago, we will be on the upside of increasing light. We will celebrate the grace of a loving God who comes among us in complete vulnerability to show us what true light means for our lives. Can you see it now? The sun is rising over the horizon, pushing back the night, opening our hearts to light and life.

*Jennifer Copeland
Executive Director*

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Psalm 148

In an age of uncertainty, finding hope can feel like searching for a distant star in a stormy sky. Yet, through the embodiment of faith, we can see hope all around us. On this first Sunday after Christmas, the wisdom of Psalm 148 teaches us that hope is always near. Hope is not confined within our hearts, but echoes throughout creation itself.

When we look at the vastness of the sky or the depth of the ocean, these wonders echo the truth that hope is near. The elements of nature remind us that there is a splendor to life, a cycle that includes both challenges and growth. Just as cedar trees endure storms to stand tall, we too can find resilience in adversity. The psalm inspires us to seek hope actively. Whether through the beauty of nature, the warmth of community, or the unwavering trust in God's promises, hope is near.

Amid life's highs and lows, let us never forget, hope is always within reach, waiting to be embraced. The universe stands as a testament to the Creator's love, calling us to look up, live boldly, and praise passionately. May we go forth with hope guiding our steps today and always.

Ren Martin
Eco-Justice Connection Program Coordinator

SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Jeremiah 31:7-14

Joy as God's scattered flock gathers.

Lately, it feels like the world has become more divided than ever. What we have witnessed since Hurricane Helene hit our beautiful North Carolina mountains, however, is that WE can come together when it matters. Our hearts, minds, hands, and feet have all been working together toward a common purpose . . . to help our neighbors! The quick efforts of community members, businesses, and nonprofits has been nothing short of amazing.

God has blessed creation with a great variety of gifts and gathered all people into one family, so that in sharing, we might strengthen and be strengthened by one another. We gather into our hearts and minds the universe entrusted to us, remembering its needs before God and this company.

Prayer for the People: Grant that these prayers, O God, may be enlivened by our commitment not only to pray them, but to live them in your Son's name. Amen.

*Donna Parks Hill
Partners in Health and Wholeness Project Coordinator*

EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14

Today's psalm is a powerful prayer reflecting ideals of justice, peace, and prosperity. It beautifully lays out the qualities needed for a righteous leader and shows us how to embody God's care for the poor and needy in our communities. Such visions align with the epiphany of Christ's presence in the world.

Epiphany calls us to lead with love, to be open to revelation, and to recognize God's presence is made known through all people and in all places. Such omnipresence challenges us to break down walls and transcend borders; it calls us to embrace difference and mend divisions. Epiphany reveals the presence of Christ as an invitation to live out that unity in our daily lives. It is a reminder that the radical nature of God's grace is for everyone and challenges us to open our hearts to this truth.

The journey of the Magi to see the Christ child tells of such truth seeking, even when doing so requires us to leave behind comfort and familiarity. The Magi, guided by hope, traveled a great distance and found the Christ child in a humble setting. Their visit reminds us that hopeful living often involves stepping into the unknown, trusting that God will light the way.

As we enter into the season of Epiphany, may we remember God's call to each of us to pursue compassion and peace in our communities, striving to embody the values named in today's psalm—a world where righteousness and justice reign. In our love and care for one another, we will find salvation.

Susannah Tuttle
Eco-Justice Connection Director



North Carolina Council of Churches

Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice

The North Carolina Council of Churches represents 27 distinct judicatories from 19 denominations. We have a proven record of moving ahead of the curve on the social issues of the day even when our position was not popular among the churches or the culture. 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 on the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament gospels. 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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