

BIRTHING A PROMISE, BUILDING A MOVEMENT

Anti-Racism Readings & Reflections for Advent

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We find ourselves in a time of expectant waiting, anticipation, and preparation for the birth of a Promise in the Holy Child. Christ came into the world in an unexpected place in an unpredictable year. Over 2,000 years later, we find ourselves with similar challenges today, but it is the birth of Christ that reminds us that we are to continue building a movement for the Kingdom of God that calls us to be in beloved community with one another.

These weekly devotions were written by some of the members who serve on our newly formed Anti-Bias/Anti-Racism Working Group here in The Michigan Conference of The United Methodist Church. In addition to these reflections, the Working Group also commends the ["Anti-Racism and the Church"](#) Webinar and this daily [Anti-Racism Advent Calendar](#) as resources for you and your faith community. Additional intercultural development and Anti-Bias/Anti-Racism resources can also be found at the Conference's ["Cultural Vibrancy Toolbox"](#), ["Hispanic/Latino Toolbox,"](#) and the Children's Ministry Toolbox's ["Anti-Racism Children Playlist."](#)

Of all the years we need Advent, it's this one. Without justice and equitability, the thematic concepts of hope, peace, joy, and love are nothing more than a romanticism of the Gospel. While these are seemingly lovely sentiments, we are called to hold these things in tension with the realities of the world around us. Acts of racial injustice and additional forms of oppression are widespread and deeply rooted systems. These unjust systems are challenged by the birth of Christ and the incarnation of the righteousness of God. Christ's birth was far from a silent night where "all is calm, all is bright." However, we know that it was a holy night and "in his name all oppression shall cease."

So, in a world filled with King Herods, let us strive to be like the Magi who placed their prophetic witness over their political motivations. As people who have been transformed by the Holy Child, we are called to "resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves" and actively work to dismantle these oppressive systems. We pray these reflections provide a challenging yet fulfilling word as we make our way through this Advent season. Join us in this time of longing and preparation with these devotional readings through the lens of what it means to be actively anti-racist.

Blessings,

Rev. Brittney D. Stephan

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Hope in the Waiting

Rev. Paul Perez

Week 1

Mark 13:24-37 & Psalm 43

I'm tired of "waiting" and "hoping."

Advent 2020 is occurring in the midst of the corona virus' third wave across the nation. Advent will be different. Many of our beloved traditions that help us to mark the season are simply not safe. This is going to be a hard, long winter. I'm tired of waiting for this awful year to end. Tired of waiting for a vaccine. Tired of hoping and praying my family members working on the health care frontlines make it home safe. Tired of hoping that things might begin to inch closer to "normal," or, at the very least, familiar.

I'm tired of "waiting" and "hoping" about many things.

About two years ago, while participating in an anti-racism training led by [ERACCE](#), I had an epiphany about one of these things. I realized that every three months I get an intense set of feelings. Sometimes it is feeling deeply that I don't belong ("Am I included here so the organizer can check a box?") or I'm not worthy ("If you make one mistake Paul, it will be all over"). Sometimes I'm angry and I don't know why. The training helped me name that I was, as a person of color, experiencing "internalized racist oppression." I grew up in a predominately white neighborhood. Attended predominately white schools. Now I work for a predominately white institution, The United Methodist Church. What I was experiencing was the result of living my entire life in systems structured to routinely advantage whites and disadvantage people of color. Systems that make me question, in my bones, my own sense of belonging and self-worth. Systems that continually sap my intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physical vitality, distracting me from who God has called me to be. I'm tired of feeling this way. Tired of waiting and hoping things will change. I don't think I'm alone.

Thousands of people, tired of waiting and hoping for change, took to the streets over the summer. The movement demanded justice for George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor. It declared "Black Lives Matter." It dared to imagine divesting from police departments and reallocating those public funds to needed social services and community resources. The U.S.A. is plagued by two pandemics – COVID-19 and systemic racism. The former is recent, the latter has been with us since the nation's founding. I'm tired of both.

Jesus speaks for those who are tired of waiting and hoping in [Mark 13:24-37](#), a bit of scripture commonly called the "Little Apocalypse." Jesus is not prophesying future events when he speaks of historic institutions crumbling, nation warring against nation, natural disasters raging, families divided by partisan paranoia, and people fleeing their homelands. He is offering a clear-

eyed analysis of the actual strategies and tactics used by empires (Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, and Roman) to subdue, terrorize, and oppress the Jewish people. Jesus is naming the violence and trauma experienced by his people in their past and in their probable future. Jesus is telling the truth.

Half in anger, half in despair, I can imagine someone in crowd shouting “I’m tired of waiting and hoping, Jesus! Will it ever change!?”

“Yes!” responds Jesus. “The world is turning right now. Can you feel it? Can you see it?”

Jesus offers a poetic vision - the advent of the “Son of Man.” For us moderns, the “Son of Man” is a bit mysterious. Scattered references across the Hebrew Scriptures seem to link the “Son of Man” with the messiah, the nation of Israel, humanity as a whole, and even the archangel Michael.

In my estimation, the “Son of Man” was a vision of liberation deeply lodged in the popular imaginations of Jesus and his contemporaries. Jesus draws on the poetry of Ezekiel and Daniel, who resisted the great empires of their day and used the “Son of Man” to imagine a life free of imperial occupation and exploitation. Rome defunded. Jesus dares to dream an anti-imperial dream. The end of empires and the dawn of the rule of love. A freedom dream for those who are “sick and tired of being sick and tired.”

I believe dreams are different from hopes. Dreams have the potential to happen now. Hopes, too often, are things left for tomorrow.

“Keep awake!” demands Jesus. I hope we, as a nation, heed those words and don’t fall asleep again.

Peace in our Preparation

Dr. Jennifer Hahm

Week 2

Mark 1:1-8; Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13

In the season of Advent, we center ourselves in expectant waiting and preparation. The lectionary reading from John tells of how John the Baptist prepared the people to receive the presence and teachings of Jesus. In the challenging year that has been 2020, there are so many emotions on our hearts—sorrow, weariness, confusion, anger, doubt, and disappointment, among many others. There may be uncertainty in carving out space for hope, peace, joy, and love. In this liminal place, let us pray for a clear mind and ready heart in preparation to focus on the concept of peace in this season.

Many people think of peace as the absence of conflict. In his February 1957 article “Nonviolence and Racial Justice,” Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, “True peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—tension, confusion or war; it is the presence of some positive force—justice, good will and brotherhood.” I believe Dr. King is speaking to active engagement; it is not avoidance that brings about peace, but purposeful intention and presence.

We see this in confronting racism. It is not enough to be simply “non-racist” or to say that one does not see color—the avoidance of something does not bring about peace. To pursue anti-racism is to be in active engagement. When we choose to be anti-racist, we become actively conscious about race and racism and we take actions towards ending racial inequities. Our eyes are opened to see that racism is everyone’s problem and that we all have a role in stopping it. We begin to see the ways our socialization has provided us with messaging that privileges White Americans and Whiteness. People are typically apt to recognize explicit messages of White supremacy and many people denounce them. However, it is far more challenging and insidious the ways in which White supremacy messaging and presence in our institutions and structures is implicit and embedded.

I believe this is where we have to actively choose preparation in the spirit of John the Baptist. We have to confront our minds and hearts to painfully see the ways we perpetuate racism and have been affected by it. As a White individual, one may need to push through the fear of saying something that could be mischaracterized as bad-intentioned or push through the preference to be passive in conversations on race.

“Wrong” things will be said, but this is how we learn—in being active and not avoidant. As a person of color, one may need to examine how racism has been internalized and whether it has been applied to other people of color. These reflections likely bring uncomfortable feelings.

Conversations on race rarely feel safe, but we must navigate this wilderness of uncertainty if we are to prepare the way for Jesus to baptize with the Holy Spirit.

It is through this active engagement of anti-racism and the willingness to journey through uncomfortable self-reflection and acknowledgement of how we engage in racist systems and behaviors that we will come to know righteousness, and through righteousness, peace. The lectionary reading from Psalm describes how God promises peace to God's people and that righteousness and peace kiss each other. May we be bold and brave enough to pursue righteousness in anti-racism and racial equity, and may we soon experience the full, rich presence of peace.

Joy Comes in the Morning

April Gutierrez

Week 3

John 1:6-8, 19-28; Psalm 126

“They tried to bury me, but didn’t know that I’m a seed.” –Mexican Proverb

One of the blessings of my children virtually learning is the conversations unfolding from their studies. My son is learning about life cycles in science and his test this week includes the life cycle of an apple tree that begins as a seed, becomes a seedling, then a flowering plant and then eventually a plant that bears fruit. As we have been discussing the environment necessary for the seeds to take root, our conversation has also moved to the farm we have a co-op share in and the social environment he longs for.

I am grateful for scriptures that give voice to my need for lament and for rituals that can transcend the temptation to make sense of it all. After a year of adjusting expectations, loss and uncertainty, seeking a grand purpose right now for all that has happened can feel diminishing; perhaps that season is this year for you. Rather, I have found engaging in rituals to stay connected with God and my faith community so that I might be open to grace.

Advent is one such season where we can take the opportunity to hold tenderly both lament and acts of joy as they are connected through this experience of longing. As we listen to the scriptures of the Jewish people in a season of longing, we hold the tensions of a people who hoped for a savior who had not yet come. This Sunday, joyous or rose Sunday, the psalmist connecting tears with joy is a healing balm for my soul. Here we enter a sort of dream narration calling a people to be rooted in their story of salvation, a re-remembering so that in the midst of the present anxieties and uncertainty we might be a people, together able to sit in hope. The dreaming, re-remembering and the beloved community are all essential in unpacking the tears with joy.

The connection of tears and joy can be challenging when being tempted to cheer up those who are weeping to make ourselves more comfortable. In these past few months there have been so many times when I wish I could give my son a “normal” summer playing with friends, having sleepovers and theater productions. Turning the tears into joy to make a situation more bearable with the grieving denies the hardship he is currently bearing as he struggles to make sense out of safety, mental health and unusual boundaries in the midst of a pandemic. Instead we name the losses he is experiencing, we mourn those who have died, pray for the sick and the medical teams caring for the sick.

The psalmist rejoices and makes two petitions —for restoration and that our tears may turn to shouts of joy. As my son and I discuss the disparities in who is affected by COVID, specifically

that Black and Brown people are disproportionately affected, we center ourselves in the steadfast love of God. What transforms my faith, what calms my being to the core is that God is God; in my own human vulnerability, in my own doubt I can rely on God being present. God does not show up because I repent, or because I am faithful, God is there because that is who God is. The nature of God is to be the One who is steadfast in love.

And when I hear this psalm I also think of the Mexican proverb, “They tried to bury me, but didn’t know that I am a seed.” In this proverb, they try to bury us but do not realize that because we are seeds, we are from the earth. Burying us in dirt does not squash or destroy us, but rather reveals our essential nature. We are from the earth, and when we are returned to it, life will burst forth. As with the psalm, where our nature as faithful people is to turn tears to shouts of joy, we take what may have ruined others and use that energy to propel life and vitality forward. This Mexican proverb points out the delicious irony of our nature - it is counter intuitive, counter-culture. They bury us thinking that we will disappear, make us cry hoping that we will despair. Instead, we laugh, sprout, rebuild and flourish. We are from the earth - it is our essential nature.

This proverb reminds me that I am rooted, a seed nourished, supported and cared for. I also recall many experiences of rising up as the beloved community. In the early 2000’s I had many experiences of protesting the School of the Americas with the drama of paper mache puppetistas and planting corn as acts of protest. The protests of Latinx communities include drama, art and a rootedness in a people larger than one person. I am rooted in the hope of bringing forth the transformation of the world presently, that restoration is possible because I have experienced previously creative movements bursting with joy from those who know intimately grief and sorrow. God’s restoration will be creative and unpredictable, to trust in the joy that only God can bring —an infant in a barn or an empty tomb.

The Revolution of Love

Rev. Dr. B. Kevin Smalls

Week 4

Luke 1:26-38; Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26

She sat at the bus stop trying to hold back tears, avoiding the look of concern from onlookers. She felt a bit of shame being in this situation. She knew better. Her only choice was to quietly take care of it. No one would know. After all, she didn't want to interfere with his four-year scholarship, awarded to him for the next year. He had so much promise and hope and she knew that he would be the first in the family to attend college. He worked hard for every good grade.

It didn't help that when she was younger, she overheard so many conversations characterizing black families in a negative way. Some of the statements she heard were outright cruel and demeaning. It was a narrative she would often hear from time to time throughout her life. She never wanted to fall in the path and predictions of those narratives so etched in her mind.

She knew however, that he was different than those narratives. He didn't fall into the stereotype that was often placed on young black men. She knew that she herself was smarter than this. So, the only thing left to do, is to distract herself from the decision she made and try her best to live these last few moments of pregnancy before it is concluded.

Three years before, she lost her grandmother. Her grandmother was the rock of her family. At the bus stop, she closed her eyes trying her best to remember all the encouraging words that her grandmother would say to her throughout her life. However, now she felt that she fell short of those words and as a result she was no longer worthy of them. Her soul, however, knew differently. Her soul believed those words her Grandmother shared with her throughout her life.

"You are blessed and uniquely made by God."

"God will always be with you."

She was so deep in thought that she hardly noticed the loud engine buzz of the bus as it pulled up to the stop. But, something within her wouldn't let her get on that bus. She knew that she was better than what she was allowing herself to think. She learned, growing up in the Methodist Church in her neighborhood, that God's love was hers to keep and even in a moment like this, baptismal waters were still flowing, and grace was still abundant. She whispered that three-word statement often passed around, "God is able."

So, she began the work of moving away from the weight of bias that she lived with all her life.

She returned home to work through her challenges with her family and his. They figured out how to make things work as they pulled together to support the two impending parents.

The baby was due just after Christmas. Sitting in worship at her church, listening to the sermon and having her heart strangely warmed while music filled the sanctuary, she realized what happened to her at that bus stop months back. She had an Advent moment that day. She felt so close to Mary yet so far away. Mary was at her own bus stop of sorts trying to figure out how to unpack the message that Gabriel had given her. Mary was betrothed to Joseph but was a virgin. Even still, this was potentially an embarrassing and humiliating scenario. Mary and Joseph would wrestle with how to deal with it.

It was Gabrielle's voice that calmed Mary's soul and soothed her fears. That's what happens at Advent. Love's revolution is hearing the calming voice that God sends. In fact, what Gabrielle said to Mary is what so many grandmothers of faith have told their brown children and grandchildren.

"You are blessed and highly favored."

"God is with you."

We've all sat at a bus stop wrestling with our humanity, our hiccups, our challenges and the deep sense of our imperfection. What if everyone knew about our spiritual deliberations at that seat? Would it be scandal or blessing? With Advent, it's always blessing and if there is a scandal, it is not our perceived mistakes but the love revolution itself. In this revolution, there is enough grace to intrude on our doom filled spirits, bring us together, destroy our barriers, heal our land, dispose of our biases and find enough innocence within us to renew us forever. In other words, Gabrielle's message to Mary is the same to us.

We are blessed and highly favored!

God is with us!

A Movement, Not A Moment

Bishop David Alan Bard

The Week of Christ

Luke 2:1-20, Psalm 43

By the time Christmas Eve and Christmas Day arrive, it feels like an end point, the culmination of a journey. The Church calendar sets it up that way, the season of Advent leading up to and culminating in Christmas. Advent hymns are anticipatory, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” or “Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” Advent wreaths provide a progression, first a single candle lighted, then two, then three, then four, with the final center candle lighted on Christmas Eve/Christmas Day. John’s gospel, which does not provide us with a birth story so much as a cosmic Christmas story, points to the coming of Christ as a culmination, “and the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

There is no question that for Christians, the birth of Jesus, who we proclaim as the Christ, is a critical moment, dramatic, decisive. Rather than think of it as a culmination, though, we might better consider it an inflection point, a moment of dramatic change that is just as much a beginning as an ending.

Every birth is a beginning, yet for us what is being born at Christmas is not only a child, but a new way of life in the world, a movement if you will. Luke sets the imperial context for the story right away. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” A word from the seat of worldly power. The scene soon shifts to a couple, the woman giving birth. “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” We are a long way from imperial residences.

Divine messengers bring word of this birth to nearby shepherds. “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” But the emperor who had decreed that all the world should be registered, understood himself to be savior and lord. Could it be that God understands power and goodness and the good life differently? The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead wrote that while we often attribute to God characteristics of “the Egyptian, Persian and Roman imperial rulers,” “the Galilean origin” of our Christian faith suggests that God “dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and quietly operate by love.”

God shows up not in the imperial residence, but in a backwater province where a child is born and laid in a manger. Good news of great joy is for all people, and it comes first to shepherds. All really means all, unlike in the stratified social structure of Roman society. Love is also justice. God is a God of love and justice who breaks down barriers and seeks to dismantle

inequality. It is this God, come in Jesus, whose way will ultimately hold sway, not the ways of emperors, not systems that oppress and diminish.

The story of Christmas is an inflection point, a new beginning. In a powerful poem, Irish poet and Nobel prize winner Seamus Heaney acknowledges that much of human history is marred by human suffering “inflicted and endured.”

*History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave,
But then once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*

Christmas is an inflection point in the longer work of a God seeking to rhyme hope and history, to incarnate love and justice. It is a new beginning, and we are invited to join the story, to join the work, to be part of this movement. Perhaps no one has put this more powerfully than minister, theologian and civil rights activist Howard Thurman in his brief meditation, “The Work of Christmas.”

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.*

In this year when a pandemic has wreaked havoc on our world, but disproportionately affected persons of color, and when our nation has been engaged in a much-needed racial reckoning, this work of Christmas is more urgent than ever. May this Christmas be an inflection point in our lives, where renewed energy and grace are born more deeply into our hearts, minds and souls for the work to which this story calls us.