

GOD WITH US

*A Social Justice
Advent Guide
for Families*

LECTIONARY YEAR A

A PUBLICATION OF
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Introduction

Stores are covered in Christmas decorations earlier and earlier each year. Halloween pumpkins are barely put away before the first strains of Christmas music come on the radio. Santa Claus competes with turkeys on table top displays. The headlong rush into Christmas can be a source of stress and anxiety. Christmas marks the end of the year according to the secular calendar; however, on the sacred calendar, Christmas is near the beginning of the year's holy seasons.

The Christian calendar begins at the end of November with the season of Advent. The name Advent is derived from the Latin word, *adventus*, which means "coming." Rather than the rush of the secular, commercialized holiday season, the season of Advent allows us to slow down, to reflect on the seasons past and season to come, and to prepare our hearts to receive Christ, not only in the form of the Christ child on Christmas day, but also in the Second Coming. This is a season of anticipation, reflection, and expectation. It is a season of longing – not for the gifts under the Christmas tree, but for the ultimate gift – Christ. Advent is a season of both joyful and solemn anticipation of deliverance.

Because the season of Advent is a time of awaiting the Christ child and the risen Christ, it is a perfect time to think about social justice issues. Christ's ministry, which is explored in other seasons of the Christian year, focuses on lifting up those whom society regarded as worthless or weak, including the poor, the ill, the foreigner, women, and children. Social justice was at the core of Jesus' ministry. Based on the Advent readings for Lectionary Year A, this guide will assist you in slowing down this season by taking 20-30 minutes one night a week to focus on social justice.

The four Sundays before Christmas comprise Advent. The weeks are often marked using an Advent wreath. Traditionally, an Advent wreath is made of evergreens. Both the evergreens and the circular shape of the wreath represent everlasting life or the promise of eternal life in Christ. The wreath includes five candles: one candle for each of the four Sundays plus a Christ candle that is lighted on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day.

The liturgical color for Advent is purple, the same as the color for Lent, which reflects the penitential nature of preparing ourselves for Christ's coming. Some traditions use blue candles rather than purple. The four candles represent Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love. The candle representing the third week, Joy, is sometimes pink or rose-colored. Just as Sundays during Lent are considered mini-Easters, the Joy candle in the Advent wreath reminds us that awaiting the Lord is a joyful time as well as a time of penance. The Christ candle is white, and it's usually the largest candle in the wreath. It is sometimes decorated with gold or jewels to reflect Christ's royalty.

About the NC Council of Churches

Since its inception more than 75 years ago, the North Carolina Council of Churches has used Christian values to promote unity and working toward a better tomorrow. This is reflected through the Council's motto: "Strength in Unity, Peace through Justice."

Today, the Council consists of eighteen member denominations, with more than 6,200 congregations and about 1.5 million congregants across North Carolina. The Council enables those denominations, congregations, and people of faith to impact the state on issues of health and wellness, climate change, immigration policy, farmworker rights, legislation, and much more.

To learn more about the Council and its work, visit www.ncchurches.org.

We pray that this study enriches the Advent season as we all await the coming of Christ in whom there is peace and justice for all. Amen.

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First Sunday in Advent: Team Hope

Scripture: Isaiah 2:1-5 (NRSV)

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

Scriptural Commentary

The season of Advent is one of waiting and anticipation. It is a time to prepare and look forward to the coming of Israel's Messiah, born in a manger. It is also a time to wait expectantly for the Son of God to return at the end of time. Advent is a reminder that our lives exist in the "in between"—between the incarnation and the second coming. So, it is fitting that Isaiah's words are full of hope and expectation, which, if embraced, have implications for our lives now. Isaiah's vision gives us a glimpse into the coming reign of God and draws us into a future marked by divine justice, restoration, and peace. The words of Isaiah speak about tools of destruction being transformed into tools of fruitfulness and peace. In Advent we are invited to consider the significance of the coming of the Prince of Peace in our world.

The passage begins with "the word that Isaiah saw," which envision the universal scope of the justice and peace which will be ushered in by God's reign. The text describes a time ("in the days to come," v. 2) when Mount Zion will rise above all other mountains and stand as a physical testament to Yahweh's sovereignty and God's dwelling place will be seen by "all the nations." Humanity will flock to God's temple and those outside Israel will journey as pilgrims to God's holy mountain to "walk in his paths" of justice and peace.

At the mountaintop the many peoples will walk in the paths of Yahweh and the nations which rage and war will no longer lift up the sword against one another. Moreover, they will disarm, transforming (literally, crushing to pieces) their weapons into tools. Instruments once deformed to make destructive arms will be reformed into implements for tilling and keeping the earth. God's coming reign is one of ultimate peace and an end to weapons and war.

To take Isaiah's words to heart is to envision a world without hunger, poverty, war, violence, or fear. The prophet's oracle challenges our endless pursuit for bigger and better weapons, the perpetuation of hatred and violence, the ever-

widening gap between the rich and poor, and our insatiable appetite for more resources and power. The closing words of the passage call the reader to "walk in the light of the Lords!" We are called to be a people whose path is illuminated by God's ways and who seek to put an end to violence and armament and instead sow the seeds of peace. This is the message we must hear again and again at the beginning of the liturgical year, shaping us into peacemakers and preparing us for the coming of Christ -- the Prince of Peace.

Reflection: Hope Seems to Be in Short Supply

The world can seem like a pretty grim place. Wars and rumors of wars. The suffering of innocents. Damage to our planet and to each other so that a few can be enriched and empowered while many suffer. The notion of neighborly love, of basic compassion, seems lost in governmental dysfunction and personal self-aggrandizement.

The bumper sticker asks, "Got Hope?" The quick answer is "Not Really!"

But here's the thing. Hope lives. Whether in the lessons of the prophets, the birth of Jesus and his promised return, the blessings of the Beatitudes, or the anticipation of war's weapons transformed into the tools of harvest, hope lives.

In our day-to-day lives, it is there in the songs of children's choirs, in teenagers and young adults who – as a generation – are more aware that their lives are endlessly interconnected to each other and that shared existence requires wiser, deeper choices if all are to survive. It is there in every hour volunteered at a food bank, every well drilled for clean water, every elected leader who stands up against colleagues who would push people farther back into darkness, ignorance or want.

Rev. Jim Wallis, executive director of Sojourners, a Christian ministry for social justice and peace, wrote:

It took a lot of faith for those early civil rights activists to endure the hatred and violence of the system of racial discrimination. It also required a change in the moral climate and values of the nation to end that system. People had to really believe such things could be done before they were possible. Change always begins with some people making decisions based in hope, and then staking their lives on those decisions. Archbishop Desmond Tutu always said that people of faith are 'prisoners of hope.'

As we begin this Advent season, our hope can be pretty temporal. That we have enough time to get everything done. That we meet our social obligations. That we give the perfect presents to our loved ones and receive the gifts of our dreams in return. In many ways, the holidays can be a great distraction from a world where much seems to

First Sunday in Advent: Team Hope (continued)

be wrong and beyond our ability to manage. Four dozen Christmas cookies for the church bazaar? I've got that! A solution to the violence in Syria? What could hope possibly accomplish there?

But as Sonya Vetra Tinsley told author Paul Rogat Loeb for his book, "Living by Conviction in a Cynical Time," it comes down to which team you choose to play on.

The trademark of one team is cynicism. They'll tell you why what you're doing doesn't matter, why nothing is going to change, why no matter how hard you work, you're going to fail. They seem to get satisfaction out of how explaining how we'll always have injustice.

Then there's another group of people who admit that they don't know how things will turn out, but have decided to work for change. I see Martin Luther King on that team, Alice Walker, Howard Zinn. I see my chaplain from college and my activist friends. They're always telling stories of faith being rewarded, of ways things could be different, of how their own lives have changed. They'll give you reasons why you shouldn't give up, testimonials why we've yet to see our full potential as a species. They believe we're partners in God's creation, and that change is really possible.

During Advent and always, may we choose to be on Team Hope.

Recommended Reading

"The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear" by Paul Rogat Loeb.

Prayer

And now their plowshares are beat into swords—as are ours,
now their pruning hooks are beat into spears—as are ours.
Not only swords and spears,
but bullets, and bombs, and missiles,
of steel on flesh,
of power against bodies ...
And you, in your indignation sound your mantra,
"Blessed are the peacemakers."
We dare to believe they are the aggressor,
and we are the peacemaker.
Yet in sober night dream, we glance otherwise
and think we may be aggressor,
as we vision rubble homes,
murdered civilians,
and charred babies.
And you, in our sadness, sound your mantra,
"Blessed are the peacemakers."
We do not love war,
we yearn for peace,
but we have lost much will for peace
even while we dream of order.

And you, in your hope, sound your mantra,
"Blessed are the peacemakers."
Deliver us from excessive certitude about ourselves.
Hold us in the deep ambiguity where we find ourselves,
Show us yet again the gaping space
between your will and our feeble imagination.
Sound your mantra with more authority,
with more indignation,
through sadness,
in hope ... "Blessed be the peacemakers."
Only peacemakers are blessed.
We find ourselves well short of blessed.
Give us freedom for your deep otherwise,
finally to be blessed,
in the name of the Peacemaker
who gave and did not take. Amen.

(A prayer by Walter Brueggemann written on the occasion of the bombing of Serbia in March of 1999. Found in "Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann," ed. Edwin Searcy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), pp. 113-4.)

Intergenerational Activities "Expectant Hope – Coming Attractions"

Supper Topics for Families

Ask the family what they are expecting this Christmas. Talk about the meaning of hope and that Advent is a time when we expect that everyone can receive God's gift of hope.

Talk about who needs hope this Christmas. For example, our leaders, the homeless, the elderly, people in countries at war, people who are poor.

Family Devotion

Put the Advent season in the perspective of "Coming Attractions" at the movies. Ask what movie previews they have seen and are looking forward to seeing soon. Serve popcorn during the discussion.

Explain that Isaiah told about the Messiah coming and the kind of hope that he would bring: hope for peace, shared prosperity, divine justice, and reconciliation between people. It is as if he was saying "This is the coming attraction... and you don't want to miss it."

Talk about ways that we can bring hope to someone during Advent. (See suggested activities below.)

Lighting the First Candle of Your Family Advent Wreath

Lord, may the light of this first candle shine bright and clear, reminding us of your promise of peace on earth.

First Sunday in Advent: Team Hope (continued)

Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for the words of the Prophet Isaiah that remind us that you are the source of our hope and peace. Thank you for your promise of a time when swords will be exchanged for shovels and when tanks will be replaced by tractors. We look forward to the promise that nations will live together in peace. Help us to live each day working to be ones to bring your hope to others. Amen.

(Adapted from Advent Worship Service for Families 2012, GBOD, UMC).

Suggested Activities

Make an Advent Prayer Chain: Use construction paper to cut into twenty-four strips. Write a prayer concern on each strip (people who are sick, who have experienced the loss of a loved one, who are lonely, who are needy, people from the news that children are aware of, etc.). Add a circle for each day of Advent. Use one circle each day for a family prayer time. On Christmas Eve, add the completed prayer chain to the decorations in your home.

Select a card or make a card. For a person who needs hope. After addressing the card, be sure that the child is involved in either delivering it personally or putting it in the mail.

If your church is involved in a ministry of hope, find a way to involve your children this week. Participate in Meal on Wheels, a ministry helping the homeless, the collection of food or clothing, or a special offering like Two Cents a Meal are some possibilities.

Make a family blessing jar: Place an empty jar on your dining table. Each day during Advent, state one blessing for which you are thankful. Write the blessing on a slip of paper and put it in the jar. On Christmas Day, pour out the blessings. Read them together and give thanks to God for the blessings you have enjoyed during Advent.

Visit in a nursing home facility. Be sure to discuss in advance what children may encounter and explain how important the ministry of touch can be for older adults. Call the facility in advance for the best time to visit.

Many teens use social media in their daily lives. Encourage them to start a personal campaign to bring hope to a challenging situation or in some way help to make the season before Christmas more meaningful. Ask them to report the results to the family on Christmas Eve.

(Prayers adapted from 2013 Advent Wreath Meditations: First Sunday of Advent by Dean McIntyre, General Board of Discipleship, United Methodist Church)

Second Sunday in Advent: Worthy to Serve

Scripture: Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 (NRSV)

Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.

Scriptural Commentary

Psalm 72 is one of the royal psalms – those which concern the theological significance of kingship in Israel. These psalms occupy a unique place in the Psalter and in the canon as a whole. They shed light on the theology of the Davidic Kingdom in Israel, but also clearly were given a new meaning for the Jewish community in exile. Moreover, they retained special meaning for the early Christian community, which interpreted them in the light of Jesus the Messiah. Thus, contemporary interpreters and preaches would do well to approach these psalms from three different perspectives: the original purpose of the psalm in the period of the monarchy, the (often messianic) re-interpretation of the psalm during and after the fall of the Davidic Kingdom and the Babylonian exile, and the New Testament understanding of these psalms in the light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

This Psalm is not a realistic description of an actual king, but a prayer to God for an ideal king in Israel who is filled with God's justice, wisdom, and care for God's people. Israel's understanding of kingship acknowledged God alone to be king and any earthly authority was thus derivative. Therefore, a king's rule was legitimate only insofar as it exercises God's justice and care for the poor in Israel. Despite this understanding, Israel's own history is filled with kings and authorities who neglected the law and did not defend the defenseless (see, for example, Jeremiah 22:3, Ezekiel 22:29). It is this failure to protect and care for the poor and the oppressed that the prophets in Israel chastise. Moreover, in the eyes of the prophets and many of the oppressed in Israel, it was precisely this miscarriage which sent them into exile. This continued failure of Israel's king to "defend the cause of the poor" produced both despair and hope:

The kingly ideal (Psalm 72) lay beyond the capabilities of the Davidic dynasty, or any of its representatives: it was never remotely reality. In time there developed (and first with Isaiah himself: 9:1-7; 11:1-9) the expectation of an ideal king

*of David's line...under whose just and beneficent rule all the promises would be fulfilled. But that hope, too, was disappointed: no such ideal Davidite appeared; the dynasty ended, and the temple lay in ruins. Yet hope was not abandoned. Ever it looked ahead, beyond tragedy, frustration, and despair, for the coming of a King, the Anointed One, the Messiah, who, endowed with God's power, would bring victory and peace to his people and establish God's kingdom on earth (John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1967, 223).*

As a prophet in Israel, it is into this perennial injustice (primarily economic) and messianic expectation which Jesus steps. Jesus' declaration in Luke 4 that he was anointed to "bring good news to the poor . . . proclaim release to the captives . . . and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" made clear his mission was to the poor and needy in Israel. His ministry to those in need, teaching on giving and forgiveness, simple lifestyle, and condemnation of oppression demonstrated his commitment to people in poverty. Thus, early Christians who came to understand Jesus as Messiah (and therefore King) and Lord began to read these royal Psalms through the lens of Christ.

The application of Psalms like this can be difficult. In the United States and in North Carolina, we do not live in a theocracy or monarchy like Israel. Nor do we live in an empire like Jesus and the early Christians. Moreover, Christians in different parts of the world experience different types of government and varying degrees of direct political participation. This psalm, along with passages like 1 Timothy 2, may encourage us to pray for just and wise leaders. We may find ourselves rejoicing, lamenting, or likely some of both over our civil government and authorities in light of the ideal set before us in this psalm. Yet, if we are willing to read Psalm 72 with the early church as pointing to Christ and his kingship, we may see in the ministry of Jesus concrete steps which the church can take in serving the poor and needy among us in our local communities. In Jesus' ministry and teaching, we come to glimpse a picture of the Kingdom of God with its eternal justice for the poor. We understand Jesus' identity to be inextricably linked to Israel and her story and thus we continue to read, sing, and listen to the psalms in order to receive such a gift. Surely this psalm is a reminder of how the reign of God beckons us to champion the cause of the poor.

Reflection: Hope Seems to Be in Short Supply

If ever there were a group of people that ticked Jesus off, it was those who misused their power, authority and wealth. Time and again he called on leaders to care for "the least of these." When they did not, his condemnation was particularly harsh – from stinging criticism to actually, physically tossing them out of the temple.

Jesus had a temper, but it was generally reserved for peo-

Second Sunday in Advent: Worthy to Serve (continued)

ple absolutely convinced of their own self-importance. Pre-occupation with self-advancement does not leave much room for helping others, and governance from a place of fear-mongering cannot support a prophetic vision of justice for all, regardless of what the Pledge of Allegiance says.

And yet throughout history, even in our darkest moments, especially in our darkest moments, real leaders have emerged, often motivated by a status quo that was inherently unfair.

At a point when many in American government were aligned against offering the most basic civil rights to African Americans, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, *"We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity."*

More recently when many of our elected leaders seemed more committed to power games than governing, writer Anne Lamotte reminded us on her Facebook page that a partial government shutdown just gave all of us a chance to lead when they would not:

And since we are not going to figure this out today, and since "Figure it out" is not a good slogan, let's do what we've always done. We'll stick together, and get the thirsty people a glass of water. I'll remember the sticker I saw once, of Koko, the sign language gorilla, above the words, "The law of the American jungle: remain calm, and share your bananas." I am going to fill a box of warm clothes and take it to Goodwill: this is going to be a terribly cold winter for the poor, what with sequestration and God-only-knows what the shutdown adds to that. I am going to pick up litter. I'll send some money to one of America's hunger projects. I'll pray and pray and pray, all day, that we'll all pitch in to help our most vulnerable, and that we'll help each other keep the faith, and our senses of humor. Remember: laughter is carbonated holiness. I swear to you, it is.

Thoughtful, honest people of any party or affiliation can disagree, and good can come of the debate around policy and procedure. But the vision of leadership Jesus offered remains grounded in the notion that all are beloved children of God and those given authority over their brothers and sisters are called to provide for their well-being with respect and grace.

In her book "Blessed Are You," Sister Evelyn Mattern wrote, *"No free lunch' is the comparable cry of many American who object to assistance for brothers and sisters at home and abroad. Both public officials and private foundations*

hear that cry and try to assure that only the deserving poor get help. Consequently, they harness their workers with restrictions and paperwork that let many poor people free fall through so-called safety nets. Thus reason evicts efficacy and mercy at once."

True leadership isn't easy. Earning and keeping people's loyalty and respect, even when they may loudly disagree with you, are tough going. Inspiring others, making decisions that are practical but also compassionate and wise – there is a reason why so many try and fail or succeed temporarily before falling to their own greed or arrogance.

As we pray for our society, nation and world, we might ask that good people have the courage to step forward and take on the mantle of leadership, prepared for both its opportunities and the weight of its responsibilities. And as we pray for those already in authority, let us ask that they make decisions with open and merciful hearts, that compassion and integrity will govern them as they govern us.

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 love, give them peace and Joy. Amen.

(A prayer by Mother Teresa, http://www.worldprayers.org/archive/prayers/invocations/make_us_worthy_lord.html)

Intergenerational Activities "Getting Ready for the King"

Supper Topics for Families

Discuss the activities that the family shared the prior week. Listen carefully and respond to what the family members say. This may inform you about the selection of activities for future weeks.

If someone extremely important was going to visit us, what would we do to get ready?

What kinds of activities during Advent might distract us from preparing properly?

Ask how can we keep our eyes open and be on watch for seeing Jesus in the lives of everyone around us?

What is the difference in a Christmas list of what we want and a Christmas list of what we need?

Second Sunday in Advent: Worthy to Serve (continued)

Family Devotion

Explain that this is a time that we get ready for Christmas. It is a time for us to clean up, clean out, and make room. Also, the scripture passage emphasizes what will happen when the King arrives. It gives us instruction on ways that we can prepare the way: by seeking justice for the poor.

Talk about the King who is coming. Explain that we can start preparing during Advent for his arrival by being Jesus' hands, feet and heart in our everyday lives. But first we must see the circumstances that need improving. Give facts about poverty that are appropriate for your children/teens and ask if any of that is surprising to them.

Explain that love is an action. Explain that during our preparations, we must value people above all things. And we must take the initiative to make a difference in our world.

Close with this quote from "The Lorax" by Dr. Seuss: "Nothing is going to change, unless someone does something soon. Unless someone like you cares a whole lot, nothing is going to get better, it's not."

Lighting the Second Candle of Your Family Advent Wreath

Lord, may the light of this second candle, as it dispels the darkness around it, help remind us that we are to dispel the darkness of sickness, poverty, injustice, and suffering all around us.

Suggested Activities

Take inventory of your Christmas decorations to determine if they are reflective of the true meaning of Christmas or reflect the more secular stories of Christmas. You can involve children in your decorating as a preparation for Christmas, and perhaps involve them in deciding if new decorations need to be added that focus on the coming of a King.

Make a Christmas list. Most kids know exactly what they want for Christmas. Have them make the list. Then discuss what they take for granted that is not on their list. Explain that many poor people don't have the food they need, a warm coat, good shoes, nice clothes and that their list might be very different. Ask what can you do as a family to help the poor? If your church sponsors an Angel Tree, select a name and shop as a family for the sponsored child. Shop together for nutritious food for a food drive. Ask the kids for their ideas.

Go shopping together. Evaluate the decorations you see. Find something or someone that emphasizes a better activity for Christmas (i.e. Salvation Army bell ringer).

Read Isaiah 11:1-10. Discuss how God's peaceable kingdom is described. Have the children create art that illustrates the peaceable kingdom. Let the children tell you how they can make their world more peaceful.

Visit a local animal shelter. Deliver food or supplies for the unwanted pets.

Select another activity from the suggestions above or Week 1 that allows children to actively make a difference in someone's life.

For teens, check out SPENT, an interactive game by Urban Ministries of Durham that will get you thinking about poverty in a new way. www.playspent.org

Closing Prayer

Help us to realize that "in the world, we may be just one person, but to one person, we may be the world." Thank you for sending Jesus to the whole world, and especially to the poor and those in need. Amen.

(Adapted from "The Lorax," by Dr. Seuss)

Third Sunday in Advent: A Steadfast Patience

Scripture: James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

Scriptural Commentary

Like the readings from the prophets during this season, those appointed from the New Testament epistles often invite us to reconsider the connection between Advent and the *parousia* – a time of thanksgiving for the gift of Christ to us as well as an anticipation of his second coming. In contemplating this text, then, we should begin to ask how the first Advent relates to the second. How can the expectation of Christ's return inform our observance of Advent?

James is a letter which seeks to comfort those who are facing trials and has harsh words for oppressors. "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy," opens the letter (1:2). Moreover, the passage immediately preceding this one declares, "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you" (5:1). Thus it is fitting that this passage contains a call for patience. "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord" (5:7a). Here, James uses the word *parousia*. While *parousia* can simply refer to the arrival or presence of an individual (cf. 1 Cor. 16:17; 2 Cor. 7:6, 7; Phil. 1:26; 2:12), by the time of the New Testament writings, the word had also come to have a more technical meaning – referring to the visitation of a great figure, such as a military leader, king, or emperor. Like the arrival of a king whose presence would establish justice and order in a chaotic situation or besieged city, in the early church the word *parousia* became a technical term for the expected return of Christ in judgment.

James likens the patience required until the Lord's return to a farmer waiting for the harvest: "Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains." This analogy is drawn from Israel's prophetic tradition. Hosea says that the coming of God to the people is as "sure as the dawn; he will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth" (6:3; see also Jeremiah 5:24; Joel 2:23; Zecharia 10:1). As a gift from God, the rain is beyond human control. Thus, for Christians to be patient for the coming of the Lord is to wait expectantly, and, though it rests beyond human influence, confident that it will occur.

Yet, farmers do not lay idle until the rains come, but work tirelessly until the harvest. The patience James envisions is not passive, but invests in and works towards future reward.

Again drawing on the Old Testament, James speaks of the prophets who endured suffering and, for their steadfastness, are called "blessed" (*makarizein*). This is the same word used in the Beatitudes, another text which brings comfort to those who are suffering or longing for justice in light of God's future reign. James also goes on to invoke Job, a proverbial figure of faithfulness and long-suffering in times of trial. These figures exemplify faithfulness even in the face of oppression.

"Do not grumble against one another," James writes, "so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors!" (5:9). One can imagine that the oppressive conditions experienced by the community to which James is writing might tempt them to turning against others or God. Thus, he counsels the community not to let their suffering lead to grumbling, violence, or strife. While James clearly seems to have in mind a grumbling or complaining against fellow Christians (cf. Heb. 13:17) or perhaps their oppressors, the use of the word "groaning" (*stenazein*) may recall its use elsewhere in the New Testament. Unlike in James, the other instances of this word describe an internal response caused by the desire for the eschatological longing for restoration and adoption as children of God (Romans 8:23; 2 Corinthians 5:2). Groaning or sighing in these texts occurs within the person and is not directed at an outsider as a complaint or grievance. Thus, read alongside other New Testament epistles, the Christian response to suffering and injustice is not impatient grumbling against one's neighbor, but an impassioned longing for God's justice to come.

James stands with numerous other Scripture passages that express a profound hope in God even in the midst of dire circumstances. This hope, for James, is founded in the righteous judgment of God which will punish the wicked and vindicate the oppressed. A message of judgment may not immediately come to mind in contemporary celebrations of Advent. Yet, this reading from James insists that Christ's Second Advent brings with it accountability. James does not have kind or easy words for those who oppress with their wealth, something which may be necessary for some of us to hear during a time of year which is often filled with spending on frivolous items and celebrating (over) consumption. For others there is comfort to be found in the Judge being at the door (5:9). Advent is a time when we learn to wait patiently for the Lord's return when he will set everything right, knowing that in the meantime we are called to be faithful.

Third Sunday in Advent: A Steadfast Patience (continued)

Reflection: Progress Takes Time – Don't Give Up and Don't Get Cranky!

Be patient.

Seriously? Because it feels like every minute we're not gaining ground, we're losing it.

If we wait for others to do the right thing, it might never happen, and no matter how hard we work ourselves, we cannot finish it all.

We see hard-earned progress disappearing with a late-night vote or the sweep of a pen. We see years of collaboration to win justice for our immigrant brothers and sisters stalled by procedure that can block the will of the people. We see the rich getting richer and the rest of us struggling for necessities like health care and the ability to help our children afford a sound college education. Patient is not what we're feeling.

But listen. Hear that? Those are the voices that fought for years to make sure women could vote and African Americans would stop being treated as property. Those are the voices that argued for a social safety net to protect people with disabilities, those of low income, the children who didn't ask to be born into difficult circumstances, and the families doing their best in the face of unexpected hardship. Those voices are encouraging us, "Progress is rarely easy, and it usually takes time. So get to it and for goodness sake don't whine about it!"

We owe that to our ancestors who kept working for change against soul-deadening odds.

In "Long Walk to Freedom," Nelson Mandela wrote, *"I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one's head pointed toward the sun, one's feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lay defeat and death."*

And from Howard Zinn's essay adapted for "The Impossible Will Take a Little While:"

To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places – and there are so many – where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future.

The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.

Faithful people waited thousands of years for the promised birth of the Messiah, but that promise was fulfilled. And in his brief time on earth, Jesus made clear his expectations for those who would consider themselves his followers. Blessing children, workers, immigrants, outcasts, and all those who were and are too often voiceless.

Jesus never said working for the least of these would be easy, and he certainly never said it would be quick. But he said that was what we are supposed to do. So let us be about this sometimes slow always important hope-filled work, ever mindful of those who have gone before and those who need us now.

Prayer

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(Adapted from Book of Common Prayer, 1979, p. 826)

Intergenerational Activities "Waiting Patiently... Even Joyfully"

Supper Topics for Families

People often say "I just can't wait until Christmas." Ask if they have ever felt that way. Ask why waiting is so hard to do.

Explain that if you live to be 70 years old, you will spend three years of your life just waiting. Ask what kinds of people or situations have made them wait (i.e. in line at stores, for a bus, for the mail, for the phone to ring, for an answer yes or no, for your hair to grow).

What has been the best experience so far in this year's Advent season?

Family Devotion

Our scripture tells us to be patient as if we are waiting for a Very Important Person (like a king, the President, a general, a movie star, a sports star). Explain that waiting is very hard to do and it is hard to wait for Christmas.

Read the section of "Oh the Places You Will Go" by Dr. Seuss that is about the waiting place. Ask what they are

Third Sunday in Advent: A Steadfast Patience (continued)

waiting for right now and how it feels (i.e. opening gifts, visits from family).

The scripture also tells us not to grumble against one another. Does the air need to be cleared between any family members or among their friends in the spirit of Christmas? Are family members stressed or joyful? This is an excellent time to share the things that stress out parents during the season and involve the children in finding solutions.

Explain that with our busy schedule it is easy to forget why we do all of the shopping, parties, cooking, decorating, and the other busyness of the days. Discuss how we can reflect love in these types of activities.

Lighting the Third Candle of Your Family Advent Wreath

Lord, may the constant light of this candle be a reminder to us of the constant patience we are to have in our living and in our relationships with one another. As we rush about with shopping, parties, cooking, decorating, and the busyness of these days, may we not forget the true reason why we do these things, and may we not grumble against each other.

Suggested Activities

Plan outings that build anticipation for Christmas such as special worship services, a living nativity in your community, or continuing your caring projects from previous weeks.

Plant a seed or make a potato cutting that takes time to grow. Relate the waiting process to the scripture that speaks about a farmer waiting for his crop to grow.

List all the “things to do” before Christmas. Talk about what is most important and what we may need to let go. Decide together on a family to do list. Guide family members to choose activities that bring them and the world joy.

Take time for a family Christmas tradition. Ask the children what they would like to do as a family as you wait for Christmas (i.e. cookie baking, caroling, family game night, gift wrapping together, making new ornaments for your tree).

Take a break. As a family, take a ten minute break from the preparations. Enjoy the quiet together. If silence is too difficult, listen to a few Christmas carols together.

Closing Prayer

O God, your word tells us to be patient in our waiting for Jesus’ coming. Help us to prepare our lives and wait for your coming in patience. Amen.

Fourth Sunday in Advent: God With Us

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Scriptural Commentary

Given the sentimentality which has become a part of the Christmas season, it is easy to forget the scandal surrounding the birth of Jesus. Jesus was born of a young woman who got pregnant by someone other than the man she was engaged to marry. He was also born in a small, insignificant community called Bethlehem. His crib was a manger because his parents could not find the proper lodging for his birth. When God takes on flesh, God enters the world with all the vulnerability and complication associated with pregnancy and childbirth, and even in a scandalous social situation of an unwed mother. What kind of God would choose for Jesus to be born in this way under these circumstances?

This story is at once miraculous and mundane. The virgin birth, of course, does not happen every day. Yet, the kinds of circumstances which surround the birth of Jesus are all too commonplace across cultures and historical contexts: vulnerability, uncertainty, unplanned pregnancy, questions about paternity, and the threat of being ostracized from the community. The community around Mary will undoubtedly be whispering behind her back or giving knowing glances in light of her situation. Joseph has to trust this child is of God and thus care for this child who is not his own. What implications might this story have for contemporary parents and caregivers who find themselves through various circumstances having to raise a child that is not biologically theirs? How do we love, accept, and care for expectant woman, especially those in vulnerable or uncertain situations, and the children they will hopefully bear regardless of the circumstances which brought about their pregnancy?

The details of Jesus' birth ought to awaken us the realities faced by the poor, the powerless, and the pariahs, including the ways in which pregnancy and childbirth can compound and complicate these circumstances. Women who are

young, single, poor, or outside the normal social boundaries face tremendous adversity and uncertainty in pregnancy and parenthood and certain 'unconventional families' still struggle to find acceptance in their respective communities.

Mary's pregnancy may have raised questions about her faithfulness to Joseph, but this child is the answer to Israel's questions about God's faithfulness to the covenant people. In the midst of the uncertainty which surrounds this pregnancy, this child represents God's love and faithfulness to Israel and to the world. His name will be Jesus, for he will be the one to save his people from their sins. Jesus' birth and the season of Advent renew our hope in God's continuing faithfulness. In Advent we look forward to the birth of Jesus which is the ultimate demonstration of God's commitment to the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast. Out of these unusual and undignified circumstances the hope of Israel and of the world is born – Emmanuel, God with us, come to save all people.

Reflection: Othering vs. Loving

Whom do you love? The list doesn't have to be long, but, if you're fortunate it is deep and rich with relationships that sustain and strengthen you.

Now, whom do you other? Who are the people you find threatening so that you hold them at a distance?

When it's an entire group of people, othering becomes insidious. The color of someone's skin, the way they speak, the religion they practice or don't practice, have been used throughout history to condemn these outcasts for needing what isn't rightfully theirs, taking more than they're entitled to, or inherently being untrustworthy.

And sadly, othering isn't limited to the past. Maybe there are more of them or they are smarter or growing more influential. So they must be undermined, weakened, diminished by those who feel threatened. Applying stereotypes and stigmas distances them and justifies the perception that they are unworthy.

This presents problems, both faithfully and practically. Jesus was about bringing people together. He believed that even the most misunderstood outcasts deserved a place at the table. They were exactly those he drew unto himself. In many ways to him, those who had the least deserved the most. They were often the most open to his ministry and the most grateful for any blessing, no matter how small.

In her book "Glimpses of Grace: Daily Thoughts and Reflections," Madeline L'Engle wrote:

God be in my thoughts, and in my heart. In my left hand and in my right hand. Atone me. At-one me with you and your

Fourth Sunday in Advent: God With Us (continued)

love. Help me to pray for those I fear as well as those I love, knowing that you can take my most ungracious prayers and give them grace. Whatever we pray, we are tapping the power of creation, and that's a mighty power. There are a lot of battle lines to cross in order for us to pray with each other, and with the rest of the world, with those who do not agree with us, with those who worship God in ways we do not understand. But that is all right. We do not have to understand. We do have to try to turn to love, to know that the Lord who created all, also loves all that which was made.

When we other people, we inherently push them away and put up barriers. When we build a wall to protect ourselves and what is ours from those we simply choose not to understand, harm is done in two ways. We make it harder ever to know the people we've locked out and we make it easier to deny their humanity and value.

Sister Evelyn Mattern wrote in "Blessed are You":

Either we live to forgive, to show mercy, or we live to punish. And punishment constricts us. Our corporal and capital punishments, our prison populations and polluted air judge us, separate us from others and our own well-being. But when we cease punishing and judging, when we forgive and give and share, we lighten our own burdens and others'. Then we empathize with and can hear the voices of many others. We know community. We live in mercy.

We are merely human, and as such we cannot love everyone. In reality, we cannot live in community with everyone, and many fall in the range of acquaintance between beloved and rejected.

But the fewer people we build walls against, the more we open our lives to the opportunity of knowing those from whom we differ and of working with them to build a world of shared obligation, commitment and compassion.

It doesn't need to be about what anyone is taking from us. It's about what we can build together.

Prayer

This Advent-time
we remember Mary and Joseph,
giving thanks for their faithfulness,
courage and obedience,
stepping out into the unknown
in the strength of your Spirit,
playing their part
in the fulfillment of your plan
to bring your prodigal people
home again.
We pray that their example
might be the pattern of our lives,
that when your gentle whisper

breaks through the clamour of this world
and into our small corner,
we might be ready to listen,
and having listened, to act.

(http://www.faithandworship.com/prayers_Advent.htm#ixzz2WV1eUDuA)

Intergenerational Activities "A Hopeless Situation"

Supper Topics for Families

Ask: What is a bully? Have you ever been bullied?

How do you feel when you see someone else bullied?

What should you do if you or someone else encounters a bully?

Family Devotion

Talk about the situation that Mary and Joseph found themselves facing. For younger children you can focus on the unexpected news and how Mary and Joseph adjusted. Older children and teens can discuss the realities of the poor, the powerless and social outcasts that Mary and Joseph represent. Discuss what some of the responses of their families, their neighbors and friends and their community may have been to an illegitimate child born in poverty.

Discuss ideas about going out of the way or noticing the unexpected as opportunities to really see Jesus and to be just, kind, and faithful to Jesus' teachings.

Mary and Joseph created an unconventional family. Ask if they know of any unconventional families and ask if they are treated differently by people. Ask how they can help these families find acceptance and fair treatment.

Discuss bullying and appropriate responses to bullying. Explain that when they encounter a bullying situation, they have the opportunity to show kindness and love as Jesus would have. Talk together about being an 'outcast' and how that must feel. Ask if there is a situation where they could befriend or support an outcast.

Lighting the Fourth Candle of Your Family Advent Wreath

Lord, let the light of this candle shine on our path, so that we can see opportunities to love as you love and to be faithful to God.

Fourth Sunday in Advent: God With Us (continued)

Suggested Activities

Plan a party. Find an organization in your community that assists unwed mothers through classes, direct assistance, housing, etc. Call and set up a time to have a Christmas party for participants. Enlist your children's help with decorations, refreshments, and gifts. This may be a joint effort with other families.

Have teens investigate through social media to find programs that support anti-bullying and discuss ways the family can support these programs.

Invite single parents and their children to share a Christmas activity with your family. Visiting a light show, caroling, cookie baking, church programs.

Plan a night of free childcare for single parents to get their Christmas to do list accomplished.

Read "Midrash: The Last Laugh." Ask teens for their opinion about the reading.

Closing Prayer

O God, we admire Mary and Joseph for their trust and faithfulness in the face of public scorn and humiliation. Help us to be brave when we encounter any person who is being mistreated, brave enough to take a stand and make a difference.

Additional Intergenerational Activities

Christmas Eve “Hope is Born Anew”

Focus Text: Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Family Devotion

Read the Christmas story together. Discuss how the shepherds must have felt wonder and amazement.

As you light the Christ candle, talk about Christ being the light and the hope of the world. Review the past weeks in light of the gifts that God has given us through Jesus.

Lighting the Christ Candle

May the flame of this candle remind us that you are the light of the world and that if we follow you, we will never walk in darkness but will have the true light of life.

Closing Prayer

Help us to be filled with wonder and amazement like the shepherds. Help us to sing with joy as the angels did at your birth. We have worked to be patient. We have been busy trying to live our lives as you would have us to live. Help us to feel a new day dawning. Amen.

Suggested Activities

Attend Christmas Eve services as a family. Even if your own church does not have a Christmas Eve service, many other churches in your area will.

Create a family tradition for Christmas Eve. Maybe it is a certain meal, or another activity that can remain constant for years to come. Make sure it is something the entire family enjoys.

Complete the Prayer Chain from Week 1 and display it in your home.

Christmas Day “God’s Hope Brings Joy”

Focus Text: Psalm 98

Family Devotion

This is a day of great joy. The scripture tells us to sing for joy that the gift of Jesus’ life obtains eternal redemption for us. Even the rivers and mountains will clap and sing. Sing the Christmas carols that are joyful or listen to a few if your family members are not singers.

Pour out the blessing jar from Week 1 and read each blessing your family enjoys. Talk about how to show our joy and happiness now that Christmas Day is finally here.

Closing Prayer

Lord, help us to shout to the whole world that you have come. Remind us every day of our many blessings and show us every day, how we can share those blessings with others. Amen.

Suggested Activities

Involve the entire family in the celebration of Christmas Day. During the devotion ask what made them happy today.

Challenge your family members to carry on with special projects that can bring joy, hope, peace and love to those in need.

Additional Intergenerational Activities (continued)

The Week After Christmas “Is Christmas Really Over?”

Focus Text: Psalm 148

Supper Topics for Families

What was the most special moment of Christmas this year?

What one thing that you did as a family meant the most to you?

How can you keep the spirit of Christmas alive in your family and in the world?

Family Devotion

Talk about Christmas being more than just the giving and getting or the excitement of special events.

Read the ending of “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” Sometimes there is a letdown immediately after Christmas. Talk about how the Christmas spirit of hope, love, joy, and peace could continue throughout the year.

Closing Prayer

Dear God, thank you for the gift of your Son at Christmas. Help us to do your work as we continue to wait for your return. Help us to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in our hearts and in our family in the new year. Amen.

Suggested Activities

Involve the whole family in un-decorating your home. Select one or more items that could remain on display to remind you of the spirit of Christmas (i.e. an angel figurine, the word JOY or BELIEVE, or an ornament hung in a window as a sun-catcher).

Choose the project that the family enjoyed the most and find ways to carry it on throughout the year.

Make New Year’s resolutions that show specific actions you will undertake to show the spirit of Christmas. Determine a time to check in with one another on the progress of those resolutions.