

Message: “Hope in Troubled Times”**Do you wait with hope?**

Ashley Kappel shares her story, “Most of my life has been spent waiting. Whether I’m on the phone with the phone company (there’s irony – she works for them), pondering whether my boyfriend would ever propose (he did and they married in 2009!), or just sitting at a red light, wait I must.”

Ashely continues, “This year has been a trial in waiting. I waited to learn if my job would evaporate. I waited to hear from God if now was the time to expand our family. I waited three weeks for a piece of mail that finally arrived with no apparent reason for its delay.

Each time I’m forced to wait, I remind myself of a quote I read online: in Spanish, the verbs ‘to wait’ and ‘to hope’ are the same, *esperar*. Waiting is negative; hoping is positive. So, try to wait with hope. This will help you remember you’re on your way to something worth waiting for.”

Ashley concludes, “How often do I wait with my arms crossed, foot tapping, an eye-roll cued up and ready to go? How many hours have I wasted watching the clock? A life of frustration isn’t what God wants for me. God calls me to share love, seek others, and rejoice in creation.”¹

You can learn to embrace each moment while you wait on God.

This season can still surprise us. We might think we are ready. We may be checking the calendar. Maybe we had plans underway for several months. And yet, when Advent comes around, we’re still shocked.

“It can’t possibly be time for this again,” we think. And we can be honest with ourselves; it isn’t simply a matter of calendar neglect. It’s that this season of anticipation comes during life in all its fullness and its messiness. We’re wrapped up in so many things, getting so many things done, so many things right, we can be surprised when the very thing we’re planning for comes.

¹ <https://guideposts.org/daily-devotions/a-lesson-in-waiting-with-hope/>

Advent isn't something we endure. It's something we become, something we are. We are people who live in anticipation, who live in hope. It's the essence of our being. So, on this first Sunday of Advent, we hear the call to pay attention. Our life is a life of wholeness and joy, but it is also a preparation for even more fullness. In our Wesleyan tradition, we call this fullness sanctification, or we might say we are moving on to perfection.

We prepare for eternity, for kin-dom, for perfection in love by living attentively. We may be surprised by the arrival of this season, but we're truly startled by our continuing need to be reminded we are called, and we want to live in hope. Worship in this season prepares us. It reminds us to look up, to get ready.

Our hearts provide the key each year. Norman Vincent Peale shared the story of a woman named Mrs. Mason. Mrs. Mason was an older woman with very little money, but her preparations were extravagant.

Each year, Mrs. Mason planned for her "Lordly gifts."² She'd select three people to give a gift to, expecting nothing in return. A lot of thought went into each present, a lot of work, a lot of self-denial and a lot of pleasure. She'd say, "We must give something worthy. Don't forget, it's the birthday of God's Son."

One year, Mrs. Mason decided on a pair of shoes for her first gift and saved the money. Her second gift was to spend a week mending a poor family's clothes. (Mrs. Mason never disclosed the names of the recipients-to-be.) But her third gift always seemed to give Mrs. Mason trouble. That's what she told her young friend Virginia.

Right before Christmas, Mrs. Mason made her decision. "Only later did I discover what her gift was," Virginia wrote. "She came in three afternoons a week to baby-sit and helped my sister Helen and me make cookies while my hard-working mother was at work as a teacher."

Mrs. Mason knew what the season was all about. She anticipated it seriously and with joy, and her gifts were Lordly because they were gifts to the Christ Child. This is a good reminder: when plans change, the good outweighs all the worries and challenges.

² <https://guideposts.org/angels-and-miracles/advent-day-19-making-ready-for-christmas/>

You see, even good things require adjustment. Things we long for sometimes don't fit into the life we've made. Because we've been living without, making room isn't always easy.

This is why the first Advent readings always sound so scary. We're reminded the world we know isn't whole. And while our hearts long for wholeness; while our hearts long for peace; while our hearts long for fullness and healing, if those were to come, they'd unsettle us.

Here's how Jesus spoke of the days to come, *"There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world"* (Luke 21:25-26, CEB).

I'm not sure how you receive this sort of thing. I know we expect to hear the preliminaries of the Christmas story. Maybe an angel appears, or a song is sung, maybe a dream or a journey or a royal decree. But certainly not people fainting with fear and foreboding. I'm not sure I'm up to foreboding, whatever that may be.

We've got movies about the end of the world with impressive special effects. We go to see them for entertainment. So, if Jesus is trying to scare us, he'd better start doing a better job of it.

But a second look implies something different. Maybe it isn't fear Jesus is trying to instill. Maybe it is something altogether different. Maybe it's the opposite.

What's the opposite of fear? Hope. *"Stand up and raise your heads,"* Jesus says to us. Our instinct when things are going badly or when the moment is difficult is to keep our heads down. But Jesus tells us to raise our heads, look up, trust, have confidence and pay attention.

That's tricky at any time of the year, but with all the distractions of the holidays, it's even more difficult. *"Pay attention,"* he says. But I've all these things to do. I've got my lists. Places to go and people to see. *"Pay attention,"* Jesus says.

Pay attention to what? To the end times? No thanks, the people all wrapped up in that kind of thing seem a little bit ... out of touch. And if the message is about taking care of yourself, staying clean so you come out well in the end, I'm not really interested.

“Pay attention,” Jesus says. Advent has layers. There's the desire to recapture the birth of the baby again. And we really want to hear an angel song and believe, if even for a moment, peace on Earth is within the realm of possibility. We also look back to what has been done for us.

Jesus reminds us there is still something coming. We look for the coming of the kingdom, when the lion shall lie down with the lamb, when we will beat our swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, when we will study war no more. There is a day out there we lean toward and hope for. Advent is about looking forward as well as looking back, while living in the present.

“Pay attention,” he says. Look around. *“Be on guard so your hearts aren't weighed down ...”* Don't miss it. Don't miss him. An amazing thing about this season is the glimpses of the kingdom appearing when you least expect it.

There are sightings of the Savior in the twinkling of eyes, in hesitant thank-yous and gasps of wonder. In the late-night conversations with family members trying to figure out what might be next, there are prayers of hope and love, an embrace of peace which brings tears to our eyes ... if we pay attention.

Jeremiah says it simply, *“The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people”* (Jeremiah 33:14, CEB). In those days, the prophet writes, God will *“will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right”* (v15).

What a surprise this will be. Justice and righteousness. It's almost too much to believe, hold on to, prepare for. Almost. Yet, that's what Advent asks of us. Believe in what seems unbelievable. Hold on to what seems beyond our grasp. Live, and prepare to live, as though God's way is how we encounter every day.

This is why the prophets are a guiding light. They lived preparation. They saw what was. And they heard what could be, what should be, and lived in that tension. They were Advent people before we were. We live as prophets today. We are witnesses to what could be, what is coming. This is our hope. We live in the tension between what was, what is and what can be today. This is why we prepare.

The days are surely coming. Like unexpected hope. Like justice and righteousness. And it will fill you with joy.

Let us pray ...

Jeremiah 33:14-16 (CEB)

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness.

Luke 21:25-36 (CEB)

“There will be signs in the sun, moon, and stars. On the earth, there will be dismay among nations in their confusion over the roaring of the sea and surging waves. The planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken, causing people to faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world. Then they will see the Human One coming on a cloud with power and great splendor. Now when these things begin to happen, stand up straight and raise your heads, because your redemption is near.”

Jesus told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see these things happening, you know that God's kingdom is near. I assure you that this generation won't pass away until everything has happened. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will certainly not pass away.

“Take care that your hearts aren't dulled by drinking parties, drunkenness, and the anxieties of day-to-day life. Don't let that day fall upon you unexpectedly, like a trap. It will come upon everyone who lives on the face of the whole earth. Stay alert at all times, praying that you are strong enough to escape everything that is about to happen and to stand before the Human One.”