

One of my biggest blessings during this season is getting to remember what Christmas looks like through the eyes of a child. This is my son’s favorite time of year and he loves everything about Christmas. He loves putting up the Christmas tree and hanging ornaments, he loves decorating, and baking, and he loves making gifts for his family members. He loves once again hearing the story of Jesus' birth.

As we begin the season of Advent, today we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent: Jesus Christ our hope. Hope is the most beautiful thing that our faith offers to us; that no matter how bad we may think life gets; we still have hope through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What is interesting is that hope is accompanied by waiting all throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament the Israelites hoped for the Promised Land, but it took them 40 years to get there. The disciples hoped for the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but Jesus rose on the third day. The disciples waited for the coming of the Holy Spirit, but the wind and tongues of fire did not appear until **50 days later**.

So, we now embody this holy practice of waiting and hoping as we once again prepare to receive the Christ child this Christmas. This year during our time of waiting and hoping we will be using the traditional Matthew Scriptures and our book study for this year: “Almost Christmas” which pairs the Advent themes of hope, love, joy and peace with our Wesleyan tradition.

Each week the titles of the sermon start with the word “altogether” and this is from the sermon John Wesley wrote entitled “The Almost Christian.” Wesley characterized an “almost Christian” as someone who “on the surface, had all the outward appearances of godliness.”<sup>i</sup> Wesley argued that we are called not to be “almost Christian” but “altogether Christian.”<sup>ii</sup> Being an altogether Christian is someone who “fully loves God, fully loves others, and offers themselves to God holistically in mind, body, and spirit.”<sup>iii</sup> This study encourages us to use these four weeks of Advent to “recalibrate us away from merely living an almost kind of life and toward an *altogether* commitment to Christ.”<sup>iv</sup>

This study reminds us that Christmas is about the greatest gift we have ever received: Jesus Christ, and that this Christmas we are called to once again offer Christ the gift of ourselves.

**So today we offer Christ our altogether hope.**

The gospel lectionary scripture this week comes from the book of Matthew. In this Scripture Jesus talked about the necessity of watchfulness and said: ‘But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father’ (Matthew 24:36). Jesus shared about the importance of embodying an active faith as we wait once again for the coming of kingdom of God.

This is what Advent is all about. After all, the word Advent “comes from the Latin word *adventus* meaning ‘coming’ or ‘visit’.”<sup>v</sup> None of us know the day or hour that Christ will return, so we take time each year to celebrate that Christ came in the first place.

In this piece of Scripture Jesus lifts the example of Noah, who followed God as he built the ark and waited out the flood.

What an amazing example of faith in Noah who waited and hoped. First, it took him 55-75 years to build the ark.<sup>vi</sup> I am sure people gave him a hard time, some may have even thought he was crazy. I mean who spends all their time building an ark when no water is in sight?

I am sure Noah hoped he heard God correctly and that a flood would indeed be coming so all his work would not be for nothing.

When the flood came Noah was not done waiting and hoping. God did not give him an exact timeline of when the flood would subside. Day in and day out he waited and hoped. He probably wondered: “Why me?”

Then one day his hope was realized when he sent out a dove and it returned with an olive branch in its beak (Genesis 8:11). This is why you will find the dove and olive branch as an ornament that adorns the Christmas tree because it embodies the hope we have through God.

We have always been people of hope. Jesus encouraged the disciples to wait and hope. In this time of waiting and hoping we are not inactive. We are called to action.

In “Almost Christmas” chapter two entitled “An Altogether Hope” by Ingrid McIntyre, she recounts how she experienced God through her active hope. For her having “altogether hope: means “embracing struggle, leaning on God, and looking forward to the well-being of others.”<sup>vii</sup>

McIntyre spent most of her life in a well-to-do job where she made loads of money. She knew it wasn’t her calling, but the money spoke too loudly.

Then one day she could not run from her calling any longer. In her time between changing careers she took a month away visiting with her brother and asking God to speak over her what was next.

She came back from this trip and said: “God! You didn’t even talk to me!...Here I am Lord!”<sup>viii</sup> She decided to get in touch with a friend who took her on a tour of tent city. There her call was confirmed to work with people on the margins and with some friends she started “Open Table Nashville.” Looking back, she said, “I thought God had not been speaking to me, but really God was telling me to rest and wait.”<sup>ix</sup> God was with her all along leading her to answer God’s calling upon her life.

As she reflected on the Scripture leading up to the coming of the Christ-child, she said, the same hope she has in Jesus Christ is “the hope that was coming for all people, including those who did not have money or power.”<sup>x</sup>

Just as Jesus Christ called us to look to Noah as an example of faith and hope, McIntire reminds us to also look to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. None of these people had power or riches. God provided for their needs and God called them to be part of spreading and embodying the message of God’s hope in the world.

That is also our calling. You see, Noah, Mary, Joseph and the shepherds were all travelers. They did not stay in one place. They remained active and took God’s hope with them.

John Wesley did this too. He did not simply preach about hope, Wesley “carried hope to [the people].”<sup>xi</sup> He left the Church of England so he could go out to the fields to preach. He visited prisons and bars and took hope with him.

He followed the example of Jesus Christ, meeting people where they were to show them they too could experience hope.

So, we too are called to travel, to get out of our comfort zone as we embody Christ our hope. This coming weekend you have an opportunity to embody the hope of Christ. This Saturday you can play a part in the Living Nativity. As we retell the birth of Christ we share God’s hope with others.

You even have a chance to experience hope today by attending the Gospel Concert by the Unity Community Choir at Willis Chapel at 3:00 P.M.

So today how we can embody an “altogether hope.”

1) We remember what God has done.

One of the most powerful images in the Old Testament is Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones. In Ezekiel 37:2-3 we hear Ezekiel recount his vision: “He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, you know.’”

If God can bring life out of the most certain death, then God will continue to offer us life from death, and hope out of darkness.

We hear the notion of hope echoed in our Scripture today from Isaiah: “...Come let us walk in the light of the Lord.”

Today as we lit the Advent candle of hope we remember that Christ is the light of the world, and we have been invited along with those long ago to walk in this light of hope.

2) We remember what God has promised: that Christ will come again, so we wait and hope.

We, along with the disciples of Christ and take Jesus’ advice. None of us know when the kingdom of God will be realized so we wait and hope, but we wait actively.

This week we are called to accept the gift of Christ our hope and give away this gift to someone else. We are called to look into our hearts to see if any part of our faith is “almost” or is dried up like the dead bones. Then we surrender our whole selves to God and live as children of the light with altogether hope.

Then, we give this gift away. Whether it is through offering hope in the form of sending a Christmas card or calling a loved one. Whether it is coming to the Advent study to benefit from a discussion on Christ our hope and learn from others or going caroling. We have opportunities each and every day to give away the hope of Christ.

Today we give thanks to God for Christ our hope, illuminating the darkness on even our most difficult days. As we continue this season of Advent may we all take opportunities to embody Christ’s hope to others. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Magrey R. Devega et al. “Almost Christmas.” Abington: Nashville, TN. 2019. P. 7.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, P. 8.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.umc.org/topics/topic-advent-and-christmas?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIirT9sOyP5gIVyICfCh2nPQKoEAAYASAAEgI8Z\\_D\\_BwE](http://www.umc.org/topics/topic-advent-and-christmas?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIirT9sOyP5gIVyICfCh2nPQKoEAAYASAAEgI8Z_D_BwE)

<sup>vi</sup> <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-timeline/how-long-did-it-take-for-noah-to-build-the-ark/>

<sup>vii</sup> Magrey R. Devega et al. “Almost Christmas.” Abington: Nashville, TN. 2019. P. 41.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid. P. 45.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid. P. 48.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid. P. 42.

Additional Resource

Leander Keck et al. “The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary.” Vol. VIII. Abingdon Press. Nashville, TN. 1995.