

## FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT: HOPE

### A Sermon of Hope

We made it! Almost. We are looking at the close of another year on this Earth, another year in which great joy was revealed in and great tragedy befell. Sometimes, it felt like on every corner a monument to loss and injustice was standing whether it be young people gathering in Florida and across the rest of the nation to mourn loss from gun violence or families gathering to grieve for their beloved who were stripped from them whether by death or beastly forces like mass incarceration. Mothers in Flint, Michigan still pray they will be able to give clean water to their children and women huddled around news sources hoping that, finally, a woman's testimony of the violence inflicted on her body would be believed. Gather all of these moments together and I can begin to understand why some folks will say that, because the world before them is too hazy, obstacles too difficult to maneuver, and the air is too thick to breathe at times, they are without Hope.

As we enter this Advent season, a time of expectation and preparation for a new thing to be birthed in our world and new possibilities to make themselves known, Hope can seem far from us, like a thing that we cannot hold in our hands and rest in our hearts. Before we launch into this much further, some folks have defined this Hope we are wrestling with as "a feeling of expectation; a desire for a certain thing to happen," so when we ask a child "what do you hope to get for your birthday gift?", we are appealing to this idea.

Others have offered that Hope is "a feeling of trust that a certain thing will happen." So when we ask, "in who or what do you place your hope?", we are asking a much more layered question about where and in whom our trust for the things we desire for is placed. Is it in money? Is it in your spouse? Is it in your job? Is it in the government? Is it in God? I offer to you that a question of Hope is truly a question of trust. I love questions and ask them often in rapid-fire form like—

Where is God in this moment?

Why would God allow such hurt?

Does God's heart grieve like mine?

Would God grant permission for this?

If so, how could a *good* God do that?

Are we waiting on God to do something or is God waiting on us?

Questions like these, along with thinking about what trust and Hope mean, necessarily make a faith walk not simple and easy, but a perpetual walking and wrestling with God and Spirit. If you find yourself in that place, know that 1. You are not alone in this place and 2. God is expansive enough and gracious enough to affirm our questions, hold our questions, and through Spirit, we are held while we ask them. In fact, perhaps this is what the season of Advent does to us.

Recall that Advent is a season of both expectation and preparation. Yes, it is a season of waiting and anticipating a new thing. In Jeremiah 33:14, God says, "The days are surely coming when I will fulfill the promise I made." We serve a God of kept promises—a promise to never leave or forsake us even in times where our circumstances do not match our desire and vision of ourselves, our families, our community and our global family. It is because God is a promise keeper that Hope is not only kept alive but is given new life through us. This is perhaps why Advent is also a season of preparation. It is a time to prepare our hearts with gladness, our souls with rest so that we may *be* that new thing that we are waiting on and *do* the good work that is required of us. For some this work may be reminding folks that they are not forgotten and cared for through food ministries or prison visitations. For some, this may look like continued partnership with community organizing groups who are working for justice for the

cast-aside and marginalized. For others, it is reminding other people, and themselves, God is yet with them and reigniting a twinkle in someone's eye. I think back to the question of are we waiting on God or is God waiting on us? The non-binary "yes" answer to both of these is most fully shown during Advent when we both wait on God for a new thing while preparing and equipping ourselves to be it.

Of course, in the Biblical narrative, that "new thing" (though anticipated for thousands of years in Old Testament writings) was the coming of Christ, a redemption, and a promise that things will not continue to be how they are. In our time, thousands of years after that coming, we still anticipate a coming of the continuing Good News that that first birth initiated—that redemption is possible and that the promise that our lives do not have to continue how they are remains full in intact. Jesus did not only bring Hope, he was Hope and I pray that in a day where Hope can seem dismal and far from us, we are able to see ourselves as the promises of God and do the things that we hope for.

Peace and blessings to you. Amen.

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 33:14-16

**Writer:** Jocelyn D. Boulware

**Brief Introduction:** "Jocelyn is a second-year graduate student working toward a Master of Theological Studies degree at Vanderbilt Divinity School, where she also serves as the president of the Vanderbilt Black Seminarians. She is from South Carolina and graduated with a B.A. in Philosophy from Furman University."