

Candles of hope where despair keeps watch

As the second candle on the Advent wreath is lit, let us reflect: What leads people to despair? How can we get

better at identifying early signs of despair? What ways can hope turn despair around?



Day 8 | 2nd Sunday of Advent, Dec. 6 The most precious diamond

“I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” (And all the people who heard this, including the tax collectors, acknowledged the justice of God, because they had been baptized with John’s baptism. But by refusing to be baptized by him, the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God’s purpose for themselves.) “To what then will I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not weep.’ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Nevertheless, wisdom is vindicated by all her children.” — Luke 7:28–35

I was a young editor of a jewelry business magazine whose job entailed mingling with the industry’s illustrious players at elegant parties. Tonight, the champagne would be flowing in one of New York City’s Fifth Avenue jewelry stores. The jeweler, famous for accessorizing celebrities for their red-carpet walks, did not disappoint his guests, greeting us to window displays of Christmas trees dripping in diamonds.

But it was a woman huddled outside the front of the store, holding her hand out for help, who got my attention. It was an all-too-familiar sight on the city’s streets, but the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty was especially raw and brutal

that wintry night.

I didn’t want to admit my name was on the party’s guest list. I didn’t want to be like the children in the marketplace that Luke wrote about: those who — even though Jesus and John showed them the way to what really mattered in life — continued making excuses for why they couldn’t follow. Would I listen to John? I’m not listening to someone who ate locusts. Would I listen to Jesus? He dined with sinners, not A-listers.

I stared at the figure obscuring the dazzling window display. I had a choice to make: mingle with those inside or stand with those outside. Turning my back on the party, I handed the woman my cab fare to return to my apartment and began walking home.

Howard Thurman once said that there are times when we refrain from doing the thing that could rescue another person. That night I didn’t want to refrain from doing something for one of God’s children: the real “diamond in the rough” who was more precious and valuable than all of the pressurized pieces of coal dangling from a Fifth Avenue jeweler’s Christmas tree.

Pray

God, forgive me when the world’s riches dazzle me. Open my eyes so that I truly see the precious lives I pass by too quickly on my Advent journey. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Do a mental scan of your community: the streets you walk, the roads you drive and the houses you pass. Where does the candle of hope need to be lit?

Day 9 | Monday, Dec. 7

Holding on to hope

I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord. —

Psalm 40:1–3

Caring friends who walked with me after losing my boyfriend in a jeep accident kept telling me to hold on to hope. “Your loneliness will not be forever,” they would say. The thing about hope, though, is it gets harder to hold on to as the years go by with nothing but God’s deafening silence humming in your ears. And yet, we are told to wait patiently; there will be a new song of praise. My song came 11 years later when, at age 43, God heard the cry of my lonely heart and led me down the aisle. Psalm 40 was the Scripture woven throughout the wedding ceremony.

Eleven years, though, is nothing compared to God’s children who had waited longer than that for God to answer them. Scholars say about 400 years had gone by from the last words spoken from the prophet Micah to the cry in the wilderness from John the Baptist announcing the kingdom of God has come near. I wonder, “How did they hold on to hope?” We don’t know. Those 400 years are silent ones in our Scriptures.

But there is another group of God’s children who have also been waiting 400 years and not waiting silently anymore. Their stories of “hoping against all hope” are being told and are begging to be heard. They are the stories of African Americans still longing for freedom and justice to prevail. They are the stories of those whose patient waiting has rightly turned into righteous anger and the call for action.

This season, I would love to rejoice in the wilderness with John who says to repent, the wait is over. Truth is, we haven’t repented; and we are still waiting for the steps of all of God’s children to be made secure. This Advent, if we must still wait, then I pray we do so together. I pray we light the candles of hope that Howard Thurman speaks of: hope heard in the words we speak, hope seen in the actions we take, and hope shining in the love we share abundantly and without prejudice. May our hearts hold on to hope.

Pray

Great and loving God, I am not good at patiently waiting. I need to know you are here with me. I need to know that all will be well. And, I need strength — strength to fight the good fight. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Explore the many racial justice resources that are available for you and your congregation at pcusa.org/racial-justice-resources.



Day 10 | Tuesday, Dec. 8

A Christmas rainbow

Then he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.” —

Luke 21:29–36

When Howard Thurman pondered the symbols of Christmas, he didn’t call upon the obvious: tinsel-strewn trees, sparkling lights and sprinkled sugar cookies. Rather, he pointed to a rainbow “arched over the roof of the sky when the clouds are heavy with foreboding.”

I never associated rainbows with Christmas, until one year. Christmas Eve was in a few days, and I was struggling with a message on hope. What could I say about a holy night in which God came to us in the flesh when lately it seemed as though God incarnate was as fabled as “a leprechaun’s pot of gold at the end of a rainbow”?

I went for a drive to clear my head. As I drove, I noticed something arching over a barn in a valley. Could it be a rainbow this time of year? It was, and its vibrantly colored arches created a perfect bow. I had my Christmas message:

Years ago, God’s announcement of hope



breaking into our lives came with the appearance of a brilliant star in the East pointing to the Christ Child who would bring light to our chaotic world. I've always stared up at the sky on this holy night, wishing I could see a sign that God is still at work in our lives. And I know many of you are looking for such a sign as well. If only we could see that star for ourselves. But we did see something. There was a rare December rainbow in our skies. What made this rainbow even more amazing is that it appeared in the the moment our nation paused in silence to remember those killed in the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary school in Connecticut. I know this, because when I called my mother to tell her about the rainbow, she rushed me off the phone because she was watching the televised memorial service. For those who say, "God has

forgotten us," I say, "Open your eyes. God is with us, as promised. In the brilliance of a star, in the cry of a newborn baby, in the songs of the angels, and now, in a rare Christmas rainbow — yes, God is with us!"

Pray

God of stars and rainbows, you never stop revealing your presence among us. May my eyes be eyes of great faith this day, seeing clearly your beauty that is always before me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Go outside either during the day or in the evening and gaze up to the skies. What do you see? What do you feel? Make sure to end your sky-gazing moment by giving thanks for God's abiding love and presence.



Day 11 | Wednesday, Dec. 9 Battered yet still blessed

Early in the morning he came again to the temple. All the people came to him and he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery; and making her stand before all of them, they said to him, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?" They said this to test him, so that they might have some charge to bring against him. Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." And once again he bent down and wrote on the ground. When they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the elders; and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus straightened up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, sir." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." — John 8:2–11

I gently pried the angel figurine from her mouth and spoke a feeble, "Bad dog," which I'm sure didn't do much good in the puppy training department, especially as it was topped with a loving kiss on her head. I placed the "angel-turned-chew-toy" safely on a high shelf and went back to work in my home office.

Later that night, as I passed the shelf, I stopped and stared at the angel. While she was battered with puppy teeth marks and now missing her wings, she was still the picture of serenity with her head gracefully bowed down and hands folded in prayer. In fact, I found her even more beautiful than when I first received her as a gift. She was beautiful because I saw a reflection of myself in her battered state. I saw the reflection of those I was called to serve. I saw the reflection of all humankind — for aren't we all bruised and battered?

Yet, no matter what scars or sins we carry, there is someone who sees beyond the surface and sees our beauty: Jesus, God's gift to us. He came to show us how to forgive and be forgiven; and because of that grace, we, too, can be serene knowing we are worthy.

This time of year, while a multitude of the heavenly hosts sing a soaring chorus of "Glory to God in the highest," my battered prayer angel sings a different song to me. It goes like this: Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see. This Advent, may we allow our battered selves to recognize that no matter what, God always finds us. No matter what, God keeps on loving us.

Pray

Loving God, I bring to you my battered soul. Life has been chewing me up lately, yet you see me: you see the beauty, the hope and the goodness within. Thank you. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Recall a time when you felt battered, worn

down, misunderstood or rejected. Who was the “angel” who came to your side and revived you?

Day 12 | Thursday, Dec. 10 God signs abound

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted. The Lord will bring on you and on your people and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah — the king of Assyria.” — Isaiah 7:10–17

I have a friend who is always seeking “God signs” in answer to her prayer requests. Many days, though, she sighs that nothing appeared. “Perhaps tomorrow?” she asks hopefully.

God signs, God moments, or God glimpses: whatever you want to call them, they are always present. But we can’t go looking for them. For when we search, our vision is clouded with our limited expectations of God. We look for what we think is of God.

If the Christmas narrative has taught us anything, it is that God gives us signs we least expect to see. A woman, not any woman, but a virgin, will bear a son, whose name will be Immanuel — not exactly how many thought their savior would come into the world. But that is how God works. How many have missed the sign of Immanuel because they were expecting something different?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many have been looking for signs that God is still in control of an out-of-control world. I will admit I was among the sign seekers, and when I didn’t see anything but growing despair, I found myself getting anxious. That’s when I took my own advice. I stopped searching and, when I did, I began seeing God in the children’s drawings of rainbows taped to windows to brighten a weary world.

In New York City, where hospitals were overwhelmed with the virus, apartment dwellers opened windows and climbed onto fire escapes at an appointed time to clang pots, ring bells and cheer the medical workers who courageously walked straight into the valley of death. And when social distancing brought the advent of circles or X’s onto the floors of public buildings to keep people safely away from one another, one educational institution turned an isolating act into a message of love by turning those circles and X’s into hearts.

Are you seeking a God sign this Advent? Stop looking with your eyes and simply be open and receptive with your heart. For as Howard Thurman once observed: We are visited in ways that are beyond our understanding! No truer words have ever been spoken.

Pray

Ever-present God, open the eyes of my heart so that I may see your extraordinary love and grace in the ordinariness of my life. In Jesus’ name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Challenge yourself to see with your heart — not with your eyes. At the end of the day, take time for quiet prayer and reflection; then write down the God moments you experienced.





Day 13 | Friday, Dec. 11

The broken ornament

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities. — Psalm 130

I drove to the church still sniffing over the pieces of a broken ornament that were in a plastic sandwich bag. I had hoped to find some glue in the office to piece it back together. The ornament meant a lot to me as it was my great aunt's. When I got to my desk, I was better able to assess the damage. The ornament was beyond repair.

A soft knock at my door interrupted the tears that were about to fall. I glanced at the clock. School was out and that meant the girls from the rural village I was serving as pastor would be dropping by the church to hang out with me. Sure enough, the teens came barreling in, talking a mile a minute about what was served for lunch and who had a crush on whom.

I noticed one girl was uncharacteristically quiet. I was about to probe deeper when she asked me if I believed God could put together broken

hearts. She had just gone to the funeral of her young cousin who was killed. She was struggling with the dreaded "why?" question that even we adults can't make sense of.

What was I to say? With the smashed ornament in my hand, I said, "Not only do I believe God can put together the pieces of our broken hearts, I know that in the process, God will do amazing things." I told her what a pastor told me years ago: Our brokenness allows room for God to enter in and make something beautiful.

I showed her the ornament, and I told her I knew it was silly of me to cry over it, for my loved one wasn't in this ornament but in my heart. Then I reminded her that Christ was born exactly for this: to give us hope in the midst of our sadness.

She leaned forward, taking a closer look at the pieces of glass in my hand. "That's a lot of brokenness in your hand, Pastor Donna. God really has room now to do something amazing," she said, giving me a smile that was probably her first one since the funeral.

Pray

God of broken hearts, broken dreams and broken ornaments, enter into my life and recreate something beautiful from the shards. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Is there brokenness in your life this day? Or perhaps there is a brokenness in the world that is making your heart ache. Visualize handing over the brokenness to God, trusting that God will make everything new again.



Day 14 | Saturday, Dec. 12

The journey begins at the manger

"Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers." And he said to him, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!" Jesus said, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me." — Luke 22:31–34

I have decided to follow Jesus. ... The world behind me, the cross before me; no turning back, no turning back. The children of Vacation Bible School were belting out the words to this song

with such energy and enthusiasm that I thought I was seeing my first revival as a pastor.

For many, Advent is the Christmas "starter course" with what gifts to buy and what cookies to make for Santa on the menu. Very rarely do our Advent appetites crave the cross of Good Friday. Yet, Advent is not just the preparation for the birth of Christ.

Advent is our reminder that Jesus, the Christ, was born to die for us. Advent is the time to be reminded, too, that just as he came in the form of a child, God will come again. There will be a second Advent for which we are also preparing. But these conversations sound strange to our ears that have long been tickled with stories of angels singing and Wise Men bearing gifts. We don't want to hear about death as we celebrate

a holy birth. We don't want to be reminded, as our Scripture reading does on this second Saturday in Advent, that we are at risk of denying our Savior. We prefer to follow the star to Bethlehem to welcome a baby. It's a journey that inspires our faith and warms our hearts. But that baby grew up to be a radical preacher, and that is where the journey gets hard. Jesus, the preacher, challenges us to see the world differently and to serve in ways that are countercultural. Jesus asks us to follow him all the way to the cross.

At the manger, we might be so filled with awe that we agree to such a journey. But like Peter, we will find ourselves in situations where we might be tempted to deny our Savior. No matter how resolved we are to stick with Jesus, or how much bravado we show, it can happen. Look at Peter.

It's Advent. We are eager to "see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us," as Luke's gospel says. This babe we find in the

manger will ask us though, "How eager are you to follow me all the way to the cross?" I have decided to follow Jesus; no turning back, no turning back.

Pray

God, an infant Jesus — so gentle and mild — is a precious sight to gaze upon. We welcome his birth. We rejoice that he is with us. I want to fully receive this gift, which means following him to the cross. Grant me the courage and the strength to do so. May I never deny that Jesus is my Lord and Savior. In his name I pray. Amen.

Go deeper

Is there a manger scene set up in your home or perhaps on the lawn of a church in your neighborhood? Visit it today. Gaze upon the Christ Child and ask God to make your steps strong in following him, not just in this season of Advent through Christmas, but in all the seasons of the New Year and for all the days of your life.