

The Season of Advent 2019, Year A – Are We There Yet?

CALENDAR NOTES

December 1: First Sunday of Advent (Colors – Purple or Blue)

United Methodist Student Day (Offering)

Beginning of Lectionary Cycle for Year A (Matthew)

World AIDS Day

References:

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalms 122 (UMH 845)

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

December 8: Second Sunday of Advent (Colors – Purple or Blue)

References:

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalms 72:1-7, 18-19 (UMH 795)

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

December 15: Third Sunday of Advent (Colors – Purple or Blue)

References:

Isaiah 35:1-10

Luke 1:46b-55

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

December 22: Fourth Sunday of Advent (Colors – Purple or Blue)

References:

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

December 24: Christmas Eve (Colors – White or Gold)

References:

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

December 25: Christmas Day (Colors – White or Gold)

References:

Isaiah 63:7-9

Psalm 148 (UMH 861)

Hebrews 2:10-18

Matthew 2:13-23

December 29: First Sunday After Christmas Day (Colors – White or Gold)

References:

Isaiah 63:7-9

Psalm 148 (UMH 861)

Hebrews 2:10-18

Matthew 2:13-23

December 31: New Year's Eve/Watch Night (Colors – White or Gold)

References:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13

Psalms 8 (UMH 743)

Revelation 21:1-6a

Matthew 25:31-46

Advent Candle Lighting Liturgy 2019

December 1, 2019 – First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Are We There Yet? – Peace

Reader One: Our Advent journey begins with rules of the road. We are on the way to where God would have us be, and we're not there yet. But how shall we go? We shall go together, as one body, living and trusting in one another. We shall go as this community of faith, working side by side, and leaning into the grace of God every step of the way. We shall go in peace.

Reader Two: Isaiah says that in days to come, the nations shall stream to the mountain of the Lord, and there we will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks; there, we will learn war no more. God will teach us peace.

Reader One: We light this first candle to burn as sign of peace among all people.

(Light one candle on the wreath.)

Reader Two: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that God may teach us the ways of peace.

Congregation: Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

December 8, 2019 – Second Sunday of Advent, Year A

Are We There Yet? – Hope

Reader One: Every journey faces the unknown. And anxiety can sometimes overwhelm us. There is too much to do; our lists are long; our calendars are filled up; we worry that something will go wrong, or we won't end up in the right place or take the right route. Getting lost is a real possibility on a journey. And yet. We claim hope for the journey, because we follow the one who will travel with us and sustain us on the way.

Reader Two: Isaiah says that there is one who is to come who will be the fulfillment of all our hope. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on this one, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. We place our hope in this one.

Reader One: We light the candles of peace and of hope to give us strength for the journey.

(Light two candles on the wreath.)

Reader Two: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that God may teach us the ways of peace and hope.

Congregation: Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

December 15, 2019 – Third Sunday of Advent, Year A

Are We There Yet? – Joy

Reader One: Sometimes on our journey, our feet get heavy, our shoulders feel burdened, and our hearts seem slow. Sometimes in the preparation, the busyness overwhelms us, and we get lost in the doing and the planning and the running. And what we lose is a sense of why. Why do we do all of this? Why is this journey necessary? And the answer is simple: for the joy of it. We forget the joy when we get caught up in the to-do lists. We forget the joy when we worry more about how things look than connecting with others.

Reader Two: Matthew tells us that when John asked if Jesus was the one to come, Jesus responded by saying look around you. Our call in this Advent journey is to look around us to see the one who comes already at work among us and to celebrate that presence with joy.

Reader One: We light the candles of peace and hope and joy to light our way as we journey.

(Light three candles on the wreath.)

Reader Two: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that God may teach us the ways of peace and hope and joy.

Congregation: Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

December 22, 2019 – Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A

Are We There Yet? – Trust

Reader One: One thing we have learned on our Advent journey is that it is better not to go alone. We live in a do-it-yourself culture that celebrates the individual. But faith is not something that we can do on our own. We need companions on the journey; we need others to support us and strengthen us and encourage us. We put our journey in the hands of many people around us; and although it is a risk, we are better for it. We learn to trust that someone has our back, as we make this journey of faith.

Reader Two: Matthew reminds us that when God chose to come to earth the first time, God chose to trust in people to help make it happen. God trusted in Mary, and God trusted in Joseph. In turn, we trust in God to be faithful to the promise and to sustain us through many others as we continue our journey of faith.

Reader One: We light the candles of peace, hope, joy, and trust, as our circle is complete.

(Light four candles on the wreath.)

Reader Two: Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, that God may teach us the ways of peace, hope, joy, and trust.

Congregation: Come, O Come, Emmanuel.

For Your Planning Team

The Christian church's liturgical calendar begins with the season of Advent. Faith communities intentionally adorn their worship spaces with a Hanging of the Greens ceremony, a precursor to Christmastide. The ceremony is held directly before the first Sunday of Advent, and it emphasizes symbols of everlasting life (circular evergreen wreath), the light of Christ (Advent candles), Chrismon symbols hung on the evergreen tree that "direct our attention to the nature and ultimate work of Christ and primary Advent themes." These symbols can include the crow, descending dove, fish, Celtic cross, Jerusalem cross, shepherd's crook, orb, crown, fish, star, anchor, chalice, shell—all made in the colors of white and gold (purity/perfection, majesty/glory), and clear lights. The Hanging of the Greens ceremony also creates a sacred space that builds or strengthens an ethos of *koinonia*, a community intentionally setting forth on a divine journey with God and with one another.

Planning Notes

The season of Advent is a highlight of any congregation's life. It is a time of joy, color, light, and anticipation. And it is a time of worship. This is a season that calls us to fall to our knees in worship of the awesome God. Advent is the season where we remember that God chose to put on flesh and dwell among us. God reached down from incomprehensible heights to touch the life we live. And God chose to be born in the humblest of ways, in a manger, in a barn, or a cave, or on the side of the road. The Creator God Almighty crying in the prickly hay, fodder for animals. There is no proper response, other than worship.

At the same time, Advent is a reminder that there is more to come, that we are on a journey toward a new reality, a new way of being. Advent, from the Latin "venio" – coming and "ad" – to, is more about what is next than what was before. It is less a remembrance of the first coming and more an anticipation of the completion of the promised kingdom. Yet, the seeds of the return and reign of Christ were planted in the first coming, which is why the power of Christmas is so strong. Our constant struggle is to pay attention to the need of the church to anticipate the return of Christ and the fulfillment of the promised kingdom, when our congregations are longing to celebrate Christmas and all the beauty and tradition and sentiment of that season—especially since our culture has been pushing Christmas on us for months now. So, how do we live in the balance? How do we anticipate what is to come, even as we celebrate the traditions and the excitement and the wonder that is Christmas?

We suggest a journey. You've made journeys before in this season: the journey to Bethlehem; perhaps, the journey to Christmas. Perhaps this year, our horizons are a little farther and a little broader. Perhaps this is a journey to a place you have longed for and yet have never quite reached. Perhaps this is a journey you have heard about since you first became a follower of Jesus. And you are not alone; many have been on this journey and longing for this destination since the beginning of the people of God. So, they will be our partners on this journey, companions as we travel.

We've chosen to weave together the Gospel and the Hebrew Scripture passage in this Advent+ series. An occasional reference to the Epistle and the Psalter will appear, but we'll stick primarily to those two

texts each week. We're calling this an Advent+ series because we have included suggestions for Christmas Eve, for the Sunday after Christmas, and for Watch Night. Your local traditions may make it hard to use the theme for those services, but we wanted to give the full scope of the season of anticipation and hope.

Journeying together this Advent+ season will be the whole family of God, the ones who occupy the seats beside you as you gather together for this shared experience. Present and not present, these are the ones who occupy your minds and hearts as you seek this new place, this new way of being together. Invariably, when you travel together, some are more anxious than others. Some may prefer to stay where they are. Others are so hopeful of what is to come that they may begin to overwhelm the rest. Some just want the journey to be over. Others are content to enjoy the ride. Journeys impact us in different ways. But even with the best of intentions and the joy of community, it won't be long before someone says, "Are we there yet?"

This season, let that question not be a whine from an uncomfortable back seat or an impatient traveler; let it be a plea for God to break into our reality and bring us the glorious fulfillment of the promise; let it be a hope that God remains in charge, despite the trouble we see in the landscape through which we travel; let it be a call to work and worship in this season of light.

Are We There Yet?

Liturgical Resources of the Season

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Call to Worship

Leader: God's Spirit has led us here.

People: And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is PEACE.

Leader: God's Spirit has led us here.

People: And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is HOPE.

Leader: God's Spirit has led us here.

People: And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is JOY.

Leader: God's Spirit has led us here.

People: And where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is LOVE.

Leader: There's a sweet, sweet Spirit in the place,

ALL: And we know that it's the Spirit of the Lord!

Call to Worship

Leader: The Liberator is on the way!

People: We're watching and waiting.

Leader: The Liberator will arrive soon!

People: Blest is the One who comes in the name of the Lord.

Leader: Lift up your hearts; Lift up your heads,

People: So that the Liberator can come in.

Leader: We are watching; we are waiting; we are anticipating....

ALL: The Coming of our Liberator, The King of Glory, The Savior of the world!

Benediction

People of God, we wait with hope; we wait with courage; we wait with joy unspeakable, full of glory; we wait with the assurance that The Liberator will come in power, in justice, and in peace. Go now, trusting and believing that it is so . . . in the name of Jesus, the Christ!

Symbols of the Season

The Advent Wreath is circular and evergreen, signifying God's eternity and endless mercy without end. The four candles represent Jesus' light for a dark and sinful world and our call to reflect the light and grace of God in the world.

Japanese Kanji Symbols for Advent

待降節

Colors of the Season

The purple candle represents the penitent spirit. Some faith communities have replaced purple for blue (royalty) to distinguish Advent from the Lenten Season. The one pink or rose candle sometimes used to celebrate Gaudete Sunday (from the Latin word for "rejoice") symbolizes joy. One of the four candles is lit for each Sunday of Advent. In the center is one white candle called the Christ Candle. It is traditionally lit on Christmas Eve or Day, where there is a service on these days.

Synonyms of the Season for Advent Prayers, Litanies, Calls to Worship, Benedictions: Arrival, Coming, Onset, Entrance, Visitation, Approach, Occurrence, Appearance

Other Advent Traditions:

Las Posadas, a Journey to Bethlehem
Welcoming the Stranger

"Welcome to Our World," 3067, *Worship and Song*

Tears are falling, hearts are breaking
How we need to hear from God
You've been promised, we've been waiting
Welcome Holy Child [Repeat: x1]

Hope that You don't mind our manger
How I wish we could have known
But long-awaited Holy Stranger
Make Yourself at home
Please make Yourself at home

Bring Your peace into our violence
Bid our hungry souls be filled
Word now breaking Heaven's silence
Welcome to our world [Repeat: x1]

Fragile finger sent to heal us
Tender brow prepared for thorn
Tiny heart whose blood will save us
Unto us is born [Repeat: x1]

So wrap our injured flesh around You
Breathe our air and walk our sod
Rob our sins and make us holy
Perfect Son of God [Repeat: x1]
Welcome to our world

Written by: CHRIS RICE, CHRISTOPHER M. RICE
Lyrics © Warner Chappell Music, Inc.

This year, more than any other year I can remember, many commentators have mentioned what our world would have been like if the Holy family had been turned away when they fled to Egypt in fear of Herod's terror campaign against newborn male children. The reason, of course, is the number of families seeking asylum in the United States as they flee terror in their countries. They, too, are looking for a safe place for their children. So, perhaps, this is a year to offer an Advent service that comes from the Latin American church, called *Las Posadas*. This service is built around the journey of Mary and Joseph as they seek lodging in Bethlehem as Mary is about to give birth. *Las Posadas*, which means *lodging*, originally comes from Spain, but was adopted and further developed in Mexico and became a service that was celebrated for nine nights leading up to Christmas Eve. Below is a description and an order of worship found in *Fiesta Cristiana: Recursos para la Adoracion* (Abingdon, 2003). Whether you decide to celebrate this family-friendly service over nine nights or just one night, it will surely enhance your church's celebration of the nativity and perhaps remind us that every family is a holy family and every child is an innocent, Christ-like reflection of the Almighty God.

See *Fiesta Cristiana*, pages 192-197.

History – You may print a longer history here. Be sure to credit *Fiesta Cristiana*, pages 192-193

Service Notes – from *Fiesta Cristiana*, page 19.

Order of Service

Abbreviations

UMH=United Methodist Hymnal

MVPC= Mil Voces Para Celebrar

W&S= Worship and Song

GATHERING MUSIC

"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" UMH 196/MVPC 82

"Hail to the Lord's Anointed" UMH 203/MVPC 81

"Infant Holy, Infant Lowly" UMH 229/MVPC 116

CALL TO WORSHIP

A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low;

The uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain.

Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken." Isaiah 40:3-5

PRAYER OF PREPARATION

Draw near to us, O God, as the choir of angels drew near to the shepherds in Bethlehem. Help us to listen to your invitation to experience anew the joy of your Son's birth. Open our minds that we may see his glory more fully, and thus serve more faithfully in his kingdom. In his name, we pray. Amen.

CONGREGATIONAL SONG

"All Earth Is Waiting" UMH 210/MVPC 78

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Jeremiah 23:5; Luke 1:26-31, 34-35

POSADA SONG

"Joseph and Mary" and a few people accompanying them will stand at the back of the sanctuary or place of worship. These persons will be the people outside. The congregation will be the people inside. Sing the designated verses.

SCRIPTURE READING

Isaiah 11:1-5; 35:1-4

POSADA SONG

(sing verses 5-6 as designated)

SCRIPTURE READING

John 1:9-12; Luke 1:46-55

ENTRANCE SONG

Here the congregation will sing the following, while the people standing at the back of the sanctuary or place of worship walk toward the front and take their seats. The congregation may face the “pilgrims” as they pass by, in a welcoming fashion.

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Micah 5:2-4; Luke 2:8-18

MUSICAL RESPONSE

“Hurry to Bethlehem”

SERMON

OFFERING

CREED OF THE IMMIGRANT PEOPLE

Let us proclaim our faith as people of God:

We believe in one God, beginning and end of all life, creator of heaven and earth.

Whose people were created with dignity and upon whom the Holy Spirit spread unity, strength, justice and equality.

We believe in God who defends the right of widow, orphans and the stranger, who breaks down borders, differences and arrogances.

Who walks with the laborers gathered on street corners, with domestic workers, with street vendors, with farmworkers and with refugees; a God with an anguished face because he lives among us as an undocumented person, unemployed, without a home, rejected and despised?

We believe and trust in the power of the same God in whom Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Isaiah, Mary, and Jesus of Nazareth trusted.

The same God who crossed the Red Sea with his people and today still crosses the borders which separate us.

We believe in the God of the prophets, reformers, martyrs of the faith, and the unknown faithful of yesterday and today.

We proclaim that same God in whom Augustine, Teresa of Avila, and Martin Luther believed and trusted; the same God who inspired Martin Luther King, Jr., Oscar Arnulfo Romero, and Cesar Chavez. All these persons, guided by the same Spirit and the same cause, offered their lives, making way for a new order of solidarity.

We believe in Jesus Christ, who was rejected by his own,

But was willing to offer himself for the redemption of all; who shares the concrete reality of our daily lives and who, through his victory over death, gave us hope of new life.

We believe we should be faithful to God, the only One and Sovereign, **who guides the lives of rich and poor, young and old, women and men of all races, languages, beliefs and conditions; and who invites us to build a new reality: God's kingdom of love, solidarity and eternal life. This is our faith and we proclaim it wherever we are, because "God goes with us." Always march. Alleluia! Amen!**

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Pilgrim God, you who sought lodging in Bethlehem for your Son Jesus, continue to seek welcoming communities for the exiled and disinherited of the world.

Just as you open your heavens for those that seek by faith, open our hearts to make room and welcome those who need a place to rest from their burdens and to renew their lives.

Here the congregation offer other prayers and petitions repeating at the end of each petition: "O God, hear our prayer."

CONGREGATIONAL SONGS

"Emmanuel, Emmanuel" UMH 204/MVPC 76

"Welcome to Our World" W&S 3067

BENEDICTION

And now, may the love of Jesus Christ shine in our hearts with the brightness of the star of Bethlehem. May that love inspire us to receive and to serve all those who come seeking God. May the blessing of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen.

RECESSIONAL SONG AND CANDLE LIGHTING

"Silent Night" UMH 239/MVPC 103

During the singing of "Silent Night," the candles will be lit and will remain lit until all depart.

Watch Night (Freedom's Eve) <https://vimeo.com/115474955>

Rev. Dennis Oglesby From The African American Registry

Blue Christmas (The Longest Night), <https://youtu.be/paWHd62raYs>

Planning January 2020 checklist:

- A Call to Prayer and Self-Denial – January -March
- Feast of the Holy Name of Jesus – January 1
- Epiphany Sunday/Epiphany of the Lord – January 5-6
- Human Trafficking Awareness Day – January 11
- Baptism of the Lord – January 12
- Week of Prayer for Christian Unity – January 18-25
- Human Relations Day – January 19
- The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr's Birthday Observance – January 20
- Ecumenical Sunday – January 26

Preaching Notes

December 1, 2019 – First Sunday of Advent, Year A

Are We There Yet? – Peace

Choosing a Journey of Peace

Journeys begin with a choice. Shall I go or not? Shall I stay and embrace the known and the comfortable, or shall I go and maybe find something wonderful, or maybe be unsettled, upset, uncertain? If you are a backseat person, you may not feel like you had a choice; you were dragged along by those in charge of you. But even there, you have a choice. Are you going to enter into the spirit of the journey, or sit with arms folded and head down, grumpy face on? Your choice is whether you are going to add to the joy of the journey or make it miserable for everyone, yourself included. Journeys begin with a choice.

Our **Gospel** text from [Matthew](#) talks about those who don't even know there is a journey going on. They are just there, doing their thing, not even noticing that plans are being made, that reservations are in place, travel snacks have been purchased. They're too busy to pay attention, too focused on the tasks at hand to notice that there is movement, that the keys are being jangled, that the car is pulling out.

The call in Matthew's Gospel, indeed the call of Advent, is to wake up and pay attention to what is going on around you. The tasks described in the text are not bad things, not anti-faith things. Whether it is the life things of eating and drinking, or sharing life in committed relationships and extended families; or whether it is the labor of our hands, tilling the fields, grinding the corn, punching the time clock, filling in the forms, tightening the screws—all of it is work that needs to be done. All of it is about building a life. And the call isn't necessarily to add more to that already busy schedule. That's a problem that we often have in our preaching: we load our hearers up with an even longer to-do list. Come to worship to get your marching orders for the week!

Instead of a to-do list, Jesus wants us to have a pay-attention list. "You must be ready," he says, "for the Son of man is coming at an unexpected hour." Regardless of where you stand on the return of Christ issue – whether it will be like a thief in the night, or on the clouds of glory, or whether the Son has already come and we are living in the working out of the reign of God time – that we need to be alert seems to be our call. But the real question is, "Alert to what?"

While some might be content to wait for a supernatural appearance that will answer all our questions and resolve all our doubts, most of us would rather have something a little more real-world to look for, something a little more practical for us to do; or else we'd prefer to keep grinding our corn.

That is why we need [Isaiah](#). "Wait," you're thinking, "What in the world is 'practical' about the text from the **Hebrew Scriptures** this week?" It's a vision, a dream, a glance into the unreality of what isn't in the midst of what really is. Even Isaiah admits that. "In days to come," he says; not now, not today; one day, someday, maybe. It's beyond our reach, pie in the sky. "Let's live in the world as it is," we claim, not as what we wish were true. Except . . .

There's an old joke about sculpting. How do you make a sculpture of a horse? You get a rock and carve away anything that doesn't look like a horse! OK, maybe it doesn't work for sculpting, but might it work for the people of God. What could be more practical than taking our lives, our culture, and our

community and carving away anything that doesn't look like the vision we have for God's reign? With Isaiah's vision for peace as a guide, we could make the choice to journey toward the realization of a dream that could change how we live in the world of today.

Advent is about anticipating something that is on the horizon, something greater than we can imagine on our own, something that speaks of God breaking in to the world we know. The season, and the sermon, calls our communities to choose the way of peace, in their homes, in their communities, and in their online presence—as the beginning point. From there, the season calls us to begin having an influence around us in the way of peace, to call for peacemaking in our schools and neighborhoods, in our local government and community priorities. We are called to take considered stands on policy issues that have an impact on all of us as citizens, but also as followers of the one who comes.

We can wait in all sorts of postures. We can be inert, knowing that true transformation will come only from God. Or we can choose to journey toward the world Advent promises by walking in the paths of peace, even now.

December 8, 2019 – Second Sunday of Advent, Year A

Are We There Yet? – Hope

Finding Hope in the Desert

In any journey of length, there will come times when questions arise. A question such as, “Are we there yet?” is only one possibility. Other questions such as, “Should we turn around?” or “Do we really want to make this journey?” or even “Are we making progress?” may occur. Questions about who made the decision, why we are going, and what’s this all about anyway are all a part of the journey—the desert part, the questioning part, the part where people wonder if there is a point to continuing. Maybe we have lost sight of the destination, or maybe we have gotten lost in the unfamiliar world through which we travel, and our sense of security is telling us to go back to what we know rather than ahead to what might be.

Our [Gospel text](#), on the surface, doesn’t help us with this existential angst about the world we travel through. John the Baptist shows up from the desert, ranting and raving about the wrath to come. With his name-calling and talk of axes and fire, he seems more of a threat than a reassurance. Even the acknowledgement that his harsh words are for the “bad guys” of the story, the Pharisees and Sadducees, doesn’t help us feel better, especially since **Matthew** seems to imply they weren’t there to gawk or heckle, but to be baptized. This causes us to consider whether our motives are pure—not just for baptism, but for anything faith-related. Do we do what we do because of the call, or because we’re hedging our bets? Are we faithful because we want to follow the one we love, or because we want to be seen as faithful?

John’s call is to turn around, repent, think again. John’s call is to think differently about ourselves and our place in the world, about the one who comes, about how we will follow, and about how we are following. He tells the Pharisees to rely not on their pedigree. He asks them what they have done lately. He asks how they have lived lately. Advent brings a challenge, says John. But Advent also brings a reminder of the destination—of the world promised. The challenge is to measure ourselves by that vision and promise.

No one articulates the vision better than [Isaiah](#). That is why we come back here year after year—to sit at the feet of the one who can tell a story like no one else. In a dog-eat-dog world, we need to hear of lambs and the wolves, of leopards and kids, we need to hear of the calf and the lion and the fatling parading along after that little child, like Simba and Timon and Pumbaa singing “Hakuna Matata” through the jungle. Beyond the vision of the “peaceable kingdom” that radiates from this text, what do the **Hebrew Scriptures** tell us about the journey?

That it is possible. That is it in a nutshell. This whole wild and crazy promise, the vision of a world at peace, the living out of the implications of justice and mercy—that it is possible. Now, you’re thinking, “How in the world can I say that?” Look at the tenses of the verbs in Isaiah, chapter ten: “A shoot shall come out . . . a branch shall grow . . . the Spirit shall rest . . . He shall judge . . . the wolf shall . . . the leopard shall . . . and a little child shall lead them.” And there’s more. You could recite them all as a litany as you preach. This isn’t a “maybe”; this isn’t a “what if”: this is a “shall.” It is possible, because it is a promise.

“Wait,” you think, “If I say this, if I preach this, what will happen?” Indeed, what will happen? That’s the perfect Advent question. The perfect “are we there yet” question. What will happen if we proclaim the possibility of the reign of God? What will happen if we decide we’re going to go with the confidence that we are heading somewhere? What will happen? The first thing that will happen, when we really believe in the possibility of grace and faith, peace and joy, is that we will live it now. Peace will infuse our lives; grace will emanate from our living; hope will abound in our conversation; love will dominate our listening. When we claim the hope that God will keep the promises made, the first thing that happens is that we change. And in that change, we become the sign of the presence of God in the world. We become the evidence that this is all possible. We who gather together for worship in order to find hope for living, become hope for those who still travel the desert of this life. We are the hope we seek.

December 15, 2019 – Third Sunday of Advent, Year A

Are We There Yet? – Joy

Seeking the Joy in the Journey

Marie Kondo has brought joy back into the consciousness of the culture in a big way. “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo” is a phenomenon that helps us bring order to our cluttered lives by asking the simple question, “Does this spark joy?” If it doesn’t, then you thank it for its service to you over the years and then let it go. True [KonMari](#) aficionados will say there is more to it than that. And there probably is. But just the evocation of joy is something to take note of—especially when it sits alongside gratitude.

The third Sunday of Advent is called “Gaudete” Sunday. Each Sunday in the season of Advent is supposed to be feast day, a celebration, but this week is especially so. The third week of Advent is a time of joy, a time of being thankful for all that has been given—the promise of the Savior who has come, who is present, and who promises a return. The third Sunday of Advent is a day for celebration. Peel away the penitential mood that Advent brings, and rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, “Rejoice!”

Our text from [Isaiah](#) drips with joy. In a desert culture, images of flowing water and lush greenery are signs of good fortune, of blessing and prosperity, and, of course, of joy. But Isaiah goes overboard, turning the desert into a swamp and the hardy desert grasses into reeds and rushes – river plants. There are pools and springs; it almost overwhelms.

Isaiah also gives us some insight into the nature of joy. Joy is communal; joy is shared and sharable. It helps us reach out and gather up others, particularly those who aren’t yet experiencing the joy. “Strengthen the weak hands” is a statement designed to help us be with others. It isn’t “strengthen your own weak hands,” but strengthen the hands of others. And it is an imperative in the Hebrew – get out there and strengthen!

Notice, too, that the healing comes from the sharing of the joy. Wholeness comes from the invitation, the reaching out. Isaiah doesn’t say, “Go and heal”; he says, “go and build up, and then healing will happen.” And together, we will all become pilgrims on the way. And no one, not even us fools, can lose our way when we travel together in joy.

“But wait,” you’re thinking, “did no one tell John the Baptist that this was Gaudete Sunday?” Our [Gospel](#) text doesn’t seem to be dripping with joy. Or is it? Perhaps we’re not seeing it because we begin in jail. Matthew doesn’t pull any punches as he describes John’s current status. John was in prison and was starting to doubt. In chapter three, John recognizes Jesus as one who is to come, the one John had been proclaiming. He said, “you should baptize me!” Jesus told him to calm down and do his thing. Then he was sure; now he was wondering. Prison can do that to a person - squeeze out the joy, the hope, the certainty.

John had taken a risk, gone too far, spoke out against the behavior of the people in power and now was suffering for it. Now he was languishing in prison. So he sends his still faithful followers out with a question. Some argue that he was doing it for them. Maybe so. But maybe he needed shoring up himself. “Was I right that day at the river? Was that one really the hope of which I spoke?”

“Are you the One who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” He knew he couldn’t wait; he didn’t have time to wait; his days were numbered.

Matthew doesn't tell us whether the disciples of John went back with the news or not. We assume they did. We hope they did. And what they brought was joy. "Go and tell John what you hear and see." Watch the reign of God breaking out here and there. Listen for the sound of laughter and hope, sung by the voiceless, danced by the broken. Can you hear it? Can you see it?

Preacher, can you be the one who brings this message to your people today? Looking for joy on this Gaudete Sunday doesn't mean ignore all that is wrong in the world. But it does mean paying attention to what is right, what is of God, what is the sign that God is still at work in the world, in your community, in your congregation. Tell what you hear and see as you proclaim the joy of the presence of God.

December 22, 2019 – Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A

Are We There Yet? – Trust

Learning to Trust in the Journey

Perhaps you, too, have become suspicious of your GPS. You're following the directions to a destination where you have never been. Then you're directed to make a turn that doesn't feel right. You're in an area of the city that doesn't look right. The directions keep coming, but they don't seem to be on the right path. It is hard to keep trusting the disembodied voice telling you how to get to your destination. We might want to give up. Or turn it off and "use the force, Luke," which often means just do what feels right. And that is a recipe for disaster more times than we'd like to admit.

[Isaiah](#) and [Matthew](#) give us contrasting tales of trusting. Our **Hebrew Scripture** text is an odd little exchange between the prophet and Ahaz, the king of Judah. If you read from the beginning of chapter seven, you'll see that Ahaz's problem is that he is under threat from friends and enemies both. The king of Israel and the king of Aram made a pact to attack Judah and Jerusalem. Though the attack was not successful, it caused Ahaz and all his people to shake in their hearts (v.2). So, God sends Isaiah to Ahaz to tell him to trust in God's protection. Apparently, Ahaz isn't quite convinced, so God speaks through Isaiah and says, "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or as high as heaven" (v.10). A virtual blank check. But Ahaz says no; he's not going to ask for a sign. He says, "I will not put the Lord to the test."

A pious response, or so it seems. It sounds like the right thing to do—especially for those of us who have the words of Jesus in mind. It was during the temptation in the wilderness that Jesus said the exact same thing. The difference is, Jesus was responding to Satan; Ahaz was responding to God. Big difference. When God wants you to ask for a sign, you'd better ask for a sign. But Ahaz was saying he didn't need a sign; he would handle it on his own. He wasn't willing to trust in God; he wanted to trust in himself, in his armies, in his defenses.

This lack of trust "wearies" God, according to Isaiah. God has heard it before, seen it before, many times. And God presents the sign, already in the works. There's a woman already with child, and that child is a sign of God's presence in the world. God tells Ahaz to pay attention, to see that life continues, even in the face of war. No one is really sure what child Isaiah refers to. Some think it is a son of the king who is about to be born. Others claim it is Isaiah's own son that his wife is carrying at the time. Maybe it was a random child, and Isaiah's point is there is hope if you choose to look for it.

We Christians, of course, hear something more profound in that promise. That's why we read this text on the last Sunday of Advent. Isaiah may or may not have known how God intended to use this sign a few hundred years later, but we can see it clearly. Or can we?

Joseph couldn't. At least not at first. On his own, he was planning to walk away. Trusting in his own wisdom, he was on the brink of saying no. No to his marriage, no to this wild story, no to playing a secondary role in the story of salvation. He wasn't going to make a fuss, but he was going to say no.

The funny thing is, Matthew tells us that Joseph was "a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace." The problem was that those two things clashed, at least they used to. Calling people righteous meant that they were obedient to the law. And the law called for public disgrace—at least as it

was practiced at that time—so that the shame wouldn't rest on Joseph and his family, but on Mary and hers. So, though he had resolved to dismiss her quietly, he was at war within himself as he went to sleep that night.

It was in this inner conflict that the dream came and the angel spoke. And suddenly Joseph knew what to do. The dramatist would want a little more inner debate as Joseph came to this new understanding. But Matthew doesn't indicate any struggle. Joseph woke up and did it. Did what? He went against the law in favor of love. Or maybe better, he went against a rigid interpretation of the law in favor of the covenant between people and God.

He decided to trust in the leading of the Spirit, to trust in the journey of faith. He trusted enough to name the child, which is the eternal invitation.

December 24, 2019 – Christmas Eve

Are We There Yet? – Love

Living in Love

What a glorious night, what a precious moment, when we gather as a family in the darkness of the world to sing and to remember and hold our candles up into the night as we celebrate the light. Whatever else happens on Christmas Eve, whatever traditions or re-enactments or performances or liturgy, at some point, usually a climactic and final one, we raise our lights into the darkness to proclaim our belief in the way of Christ.

Consider that act for a moment. Why? What? How? Not the logistics of passing the flame, though that is sometimes complicated. But what are you doing in that ritual? Is it a declaration, a shout into the darkness? Is it a promise, a pledge to live by the light and not succumb to the darkness? Is it defiance, or pride, or hope? Does your arm shake? Does the light seem heavy? Or do you feel small in the face of the overpowering denial of the world?

Or maybe it's just a candle, used many times, held by many hands, then stored in a box until next Christmas Eve service. Just a candle, just a light, just a simple thing. Try not doing it this year. See how that goes over. There is something going on here.

Isaiah says that what makes the people of God stand out is that they have seen a light. Where did they see it? When did they see it? Isaiah doesn't say. But they saw it. It shined on them, even though they lived in deep darkness. Now, like an after image from a bright flash, they see things that aren't there yet. They see an end to war; they see joy in the people; and they see the one who loves them like no other has before. They see this, even though it isn't there—or not completely there yet. They see it because they can choose to live it; they choose to live in love, even though others do not. They can choose to believe in and follow the one who hasn't come yet, or the one who hasn't returned.

We gather in the darkness of this night to worship the light. Just as the shepherds made their way from the countryside around Bethlehem in the dark of night to worship the one whose birth lit up the sky. [Luke's](#) beautiful Christmas story is seared into our hearts by the startling appearance of the angels to the unsuspecting shepherds, filling them with fear. (Someone said, many years ago, when reading from the older versions, that "sore afraid" meant that they were so scared it hurt!) But out of fear came hope, and when the glory shone around them, they felt included, invited, part of something so much bigger than themselves that they couldn't help but go and see.

We gather, not just to be warmed by a familiar story and much-loved rituals, but to bear witness to the light. And our witness is to live a life of love inside the community of faith and outside in the world that God loved so much that the Child was born here to live among us.

Our journey is not complete, however. Our question still begs for an answer, even tonight. "Are we there yet?" Because it is all too painfully obvious that we are not there, not living in the light, not enjoying the reign of God, not living in the vision of peace that we cling to in the darkness of a divided and hate-filled world. But we can create that space, that place, that peace when we choose to live in love. Christmas is an invitation to choose to live in love.

December 29, 2019 – First Sunday After Christmas Day

Are We There Yet? – So Now What?

So Now What?

The post-holiday blues hit hard sometimes. It was a frenetic journey to the celebration of Christmas, but now the lights don't seem so bright and colorful, and the music grates on our ears. Or worse, things have fallen apart, and the family closeness lasted only a minute or two before the rivalries and resentments returned.

There is certainly no basking in the Christmas glow in [Matthew's Gospel text](#) this Christmastide Sunday. With a dream of warning, Joseph and his new family become refugees, fleeing an oppressive ruler who wants to kill the child. For Matthew, it is a fulfillment of a prophecy; for Joseph and Mary, it is a moment of terror. For the little town of Bethlehem, it is a tragedy of historical proportions. Any time disaster strikes, natural- or human-originated, questions arise. No doubt between your pronouncement of peace on earth on Christmas Eve and this Sunday's worship, something tragic has happened in your world. Maybe something personal and local, maybe something on a larger scale: another shooting, another fire or flood, something: it is almost inevitable. Your congregation isn't looking for an explanation or a "take back" of the promises you recalled on Christmas Eve. But a "so now what" is in order.

[Isaiah](#) gives us a hint of how to go forward when the world doesn't fit the destination we have in our minds and hearts. And that hint is simply to tell the story. We will tell what has happened to us; we will tell our story, our testimony of how God has acted for us and with us. We will tell the stories we read and the stories we live. We will tell them to one another, and we will tell them to the world. And as we tell them, we will remember what God has done and is doing. Despite living in a world that doesn't look like what God's reign should be, we will see glimpses of it here and there, in us and beyond us. And we will tell that story too.

Storytelling, or testimony, isn't just a way of whistling in the dark to keep the fear at bay. Testimony is reliving the moments of salvation; it is reclaiming the presence that seemed so real – because it was real – in the dark of our Christmas Eve service. Testimony is relighting those candles that we held into the air as we sang "Silent Night," except now instead of wax and wick, we bring stories and memories to light the darkness in which we live—until the darkness begins to resemble the light.

So now what? Now we keep going, moving on to the destination of God's reign, of an eternity in God's presence.

December 31, 2019 – New Year's Eve/Watch Night

Are We There Yet? – Claiming the Promise

Claiming the Promise

Watch Night is another night to gather together to worship and to hope. Watch Night is not simply the culmination of the Advent and Christmas series, but a new beginning. It is an opportunity to set a course for the journey that continues. But this course setting is less about a route or even a destination (since God is the destination) and more about a mode of transport. Mode? Perhaps mood works better. Or attitude. Watch Night helps us declare how we will travel.

Our text from the **Hebrew Scriptures** is familiar, but often misunderstood. [Ecclesiastes 3:1-13](#) is well known, in part thanks to the '60s band The Byrds. "To everything (turn, turn, turn) / there is a season (turn, turn, turn) / and a time for every purpose under heaven." It sounds almost like a "whatever will be, will be" kind of thought. Everything happens as it is supposed to happen, when it happens. There is fatalism in these verses, for some; predestination, for others. But neither has to be found there.

The preacher (or *Quohélet* as the author is called in the Hebrew) is pointing out a hard truth and then offering an invitation. The hard truth is that stuff happens. We know that. We have another phrase, but "stuff" works best here. And we don't know why stuff happens, good stuff or bad stuff. That's the ignorance that the preacher refers to in verse 11. We don't know why or whether God sends or doesn't send stuff. It is futile to try and figure it out. Wisdom literature from the Bible is full of this futility. If you think you can figure out what God is doing in the stuff of this world, go spend some time with Job. That's the hard truth.

Given that truth, what can we do? Give up. That's one option. Just give up and do what you want. Many have taken that route. But that's not the only option. Nor is it the one that the preacher advocates. "I know that there is nothing better for them than to be happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; moreover, it is God's gift that all should eat and drink and take pleasure in all their toil" (Eccl 3:12-13). That's the summation verse of this daunting text. So, what's the invitation? To live!

We are called to live fully, to live aware, to live alive. Jesus says in John that he has come that we might have life and have it abundantly. The invitation is to live every moment. We are to live the good moments in celebration and joy; the difficult ones, in prayer and in confidence that we are not alone, but alive in suffering as well as in prosperity.

Matthew 25 takes it even further. It's the same idea, just deeper. To live alive, Jesus says in the [Gospel text](#), is to live connected to those who hurt, to those who need, to those who have been pushed to the margins of our society. The invitation is to live outwardly, seeing all the people, and being present in ways that bring relief and bring hope.

Watch Night is about wanting to see Jesus in the year that stretches out in front of us. Matthew 25 tells us how to be sure to see Jesus in the coming year. It is about making a commitment to live fully engaged, not turning away from brokenness or difficulty, from suffering or need, but ready to meet them where they are.

Are we there yet?