

Advent and Christmas Resources for Pastors and Worship Committees

Advent 4 and Christmas Eve are both on Sunday this year, and Christmas 1 is New Year's Eve. I imagine pastors trying to scramble to write multiple sermons and liturgies in a compressed time. Therefore, I have crafted two liturgies that can be adapted, if it seems meet and right to your pastors and the Holy Spirit.

The only miracle story that appears in all four gospels is the feeding of the 5,000. Here is part of that story from Matthew 14: When Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them . . . the disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

And then he took what the disciples had, five loaves of bread and two fish, blessed and broke them, and there was enough for everyone to be filled. Twelve baskets of leftovers remained.

Jesus's most significant and revelatory work usually involved a table and food, or in this case, a patch of wilderness for 5,000 of his closest friends, and some fish and bread. His ministry was centered on the most fundamental human need—hunger—physical, spiritual, and otherwise.

When he encountered hungry people, he gave them bread. That was action consistent with God's will as revealed throughout the scriptures: that hungry people be fed. Jesus refused to let the disciples off the hook when they heard grumbling bellies. He refused to ignore—and in fact, sought to smash—the systemic injustices of his time and culture in which a few wealthy controlled access to most of the resources and food insecurity was an acceptable condition for everyone else. Jesus always assumed an attitude of abundance and generosity. In the Kingdom of God, which he came to establish, there would be plenty to go around.

That's different than the world's teachings of self-sufficiency and scarcity, where there's only so much to go around, and everyone is on their own. Those are disturbing enough ways to think and act in normal times and deadly during a crisis.

Jesus calls us to dream bigger. He calls us to change our ideas about how much is enough and who is entitled to what. He reminds us that it's our responsibility to give bread to people who are hungry.

Let us pray: Thank you, Lord God, for blessing our brokenness and feeding our hunger and giving us the invitation to do likewise for our neighbors. Amen.

o the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' . . . He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

We are not the first people to live in a time of social chaos, economic insecurity, and political turmoil. During the 8th century BCE, Isaiah ministered to a nation impoverished and divided by war, conflict, and every manner of injustice. To a society hungry for peace and longing for hope, the prophet offered a radically different vision than their reality.

Peace, he said, will be realized when God's desire for us becomes our desire for us—and we live that way. Enemies become friends and partners in the healing of creation. Broken relationships and systems are restored to wholeness for the benefit of all. Tractors and seeds matter more to an economy than tanks and guns. Empty bellies are filled.

Some thought he was dim, others a "pie in the sky" dreamer. He offended the powerful. He risked alienating the entire population of Jerusalem with a grandiose image of a future they could not see or imagine. But isn't that the role of the prophet, the preacher, the messenger of God, and the person of faith? To offer a vision of hope, even—or maybe especially—when it seems most distant?

If you feel like we are living through a dystopian nightmare, rife with disease, corruption, division, hatred, and violence, a nightmare that keeps you up at night and worries you by day, you are not the only one. Many of us feel like we are constantly walking on the border of despair.

So take this as a gentle but insistent reminder. We are the stewards of a new vision for the world, one that has been left in our care by the prophets and gifted to us by Jesus. It is a vision of transformation, renewal, resurrection, and shalom. A vision in which the oppressed are set free.

Yokes are broken. People share their bread with the hungry, their homes with the homeless, their clothes with the naked, and their whole lives with their families and communities to the glory of God.

When we are at our best, we live that vision. When our worship leads us to care for others, especially the most vulnerable. When we are engaged in works of healing, justice, and mercy. When our actions in the world are consistent with what we profess to believe—and the One we have pledged to follow. When we shine God's light in whatever darkness we stumble upon—sorrow, corruption, anger, brutality, ignorance, prejudice—in order to point others to the goodness and grace of God.

Especially in times of chaos and fear, everyone needs a steady word of assurance and a vision of hope. God does the work of transformation, but if we really want others to have hope, we have to help them catch the vision. We have to believe it, imagine it, articulate it, and live it.

Let us pray: Steadfast God, thank you for your vision of hope during a difficult time. Inspire us to trust it, work for it, and share it with others. Amen.

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How's your hope tank these days? Comfortably full? Running on empty? Somewhere in between? In general, what makes you feel hopeful during difficult times when despair is lurking around every corner, just waiting to catch you in a weak moment?

Under the best of circumstances, living brings pain. People get sick and die. We are hateful and hurtful to one another. Our national politics are a freak show. Public policy and practice seems hostile to the most vulnerable among us. Then there's climate change, racial injustice, violence, and enormous inequities. The list of what is troubling is long. It's easy to lose hope.

The stakes are especially high right now. We're a few months into a global pandemic. Concerns about the health of our loved ones—and our own well-being—are paramount. The economy is in free-fall. Even if our income has remained steady or we have a cushion, we may be deeply worried about our children's and grandchildren's futures. We do not know how long this will last. We wonder how we will endure.

Listen to the words from Romans 15.4, 13: For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. . . . May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I am finding great solace in the scriptures these days. Reading reminds me that generations before us have known trials not unlike our own. Poverty, migration, persecution, plagues, loss, and death have long been part of the human experience. Paul tells us that he and others wrote their stories to encourage those who would come after them, to give hope to others who are grasping for something to hold onto. Their stories are assurance that we too can endure our painful present.

People of God have always found their hope in God's steadfast love and abundant grace, in forgiveness, in the peace of God's presence, in the incarnation of Jesus, in the promise of new life. God gives us—as individuals and the church—the gift of Holy Spirit so we can continue to hope.

I keep these words on the desk in my office upstairs which speak to hope. You may have seen this inscription that was left by an anonymous Jewish refugee on the wall of a Polish internment camp and found after World War II:

I believe in the sun even when it is not shining.

I believe in love even when I am alone.

I believe in God even when he is silent.

After a couple of hard days, I'm looking for signs of hope again. The sun breaks through the clouds. A kind note from my mother-in-law arrives in the mail. Flowers bloom and birds sing. My old dog gets goofy with joy when it's time for a walk. Green growth pushes through the dirt in search of the sun. Acts of kindness and generosity abound. Heroic and weary nurses and doctors show up to care for people, no matter how risky their jobs. People heal and recover. The strength and faith of our ancestors who cheer for us from beyond and who left a path for us from darkness to light.

Let us pray: Steadfast God, fill us with hope today. May it overflow so that others feel it too. Amen.