

⊕ LIVING COMPASS

Living Well Through Advent 2020



*Practicing Hope with All Your
Heart, Soul, Strength, and Mind*

A Living Compass Seasonal Resource

Join Our Facebook Advent Retreat Group & Sign Up for Our Daily Devotional Emails

Are there others with whom you might want to share this Advent journey through this devotional booklet? Following are two additional ways you, and others, can deepen your experience of Advent.

Visit us at LivingCompass.org/Advent to learn more or to sign up.



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Advent Facebook Retreat Group
We would like to invite you to join our Advent Facebook retreat group. If you participate in this private group, you will be enriched by your interactions with hundreds of others who are also reading this devotional.

Daily Devotional Emails
We also are offering an opportunity for you to have the reflections from this devotional emailed to you each day during Advent.

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The Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative was created with a generous gift from Ab and Nancy Nicholas. While Ab passed away in 2016, their generous support continues to inspire us and make this resource possible.



Outfitting individuals, families, congregations, and communities with tools and training for the journey toward wellness and wholeness.

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Editor: Robbin Brent
Proofreader: Holly Stoner

Cover design: Andrew Breitenberg
Compositor: Rick Soldin

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- Image: *Seth Dietrich*, p. 5; Name: kbattlephotography • Image: *Jeff Fisher*, p. 5; Name: Marcel van Es

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 - Questions? Email us: info@livingcompass.org

About the Writers



The Rev. Catherine Tyndall Boyd's path to ordination included ministry in four dioceses and numerous parishes; she was ordained priest in 2007 in the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. Cathy is a longtime retreat leader, particularly for women and spouses of clergy. Cathy currently serves as rector of St. Martin's, Williamsburg, and considers preaching to be the single most important cornerstone of parish pastoral care. An alumna of the Episcopal Seminary of the Southwest, Cathy has been married for nearly 40 years to the Rev. David Boyd, and they have two fantastic grown children.



The Rev. Canon Anita Braden currently serves as the Canon to the Ordinary in the Episcopal Diocese of Arizona. Before joining the diocesan staff, she served as Chaplain of St. Margaret's school in Tappahannock, VA, and served parishes in Washington, D.C., and Milwaukee, WI, offering her gifts as a "faithful and fiery" preacher and formation leader. An Alumna of Virginia Theological Seminary, she is working to complete a doctorate in Educational Leadership and Christian Spirituality. Mother to daughter Kamisa, and son Matthew, Anita is also the proud grandmother of two granddaughters. Two of her favorite hobbies are needlepoint and growing orchids.



Robbin Brent is the Director of Publications and Resource Development for Living Compass, founder of Wisdom Way of Knowing, Inc., and the former Director of the Center for Spiritual



Resources in NC. Robbin is an experienced leader of spiritual retreats and programs, facilitates gatherings of contemplative leaders around the world, and is a graduate of Shalem's Transforming Community program. She loves spending time with her two sons and grandson, hiking, and early morning coffee and communion with the wildlife that graces her backyard.



The Rev. Seth Dietrich, an Episcopal priest, serves Christ Church, Whitefish Bay, in the greater Milwaukee area. He was educated at Wheaton College in Illinois and Virginia Theological Seminary in the D.C. area. He believes camping and fishing in the wilderness are forms of prayer. A native of Austin, he has been surprised by how much joy can be found in Milwaukee's winter, and he has learned to lean on others in the midst of a cold, slow spring.



The Rt. Rev. Jeff W. Fisher is the 10th Bishop Suffragan of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas. He lives in Tyler and serves as the bishop for the east region of the diocese. A graduate of the Virginia Theological Seminary, Jeff is an effective and passionate preacher; his sermons can be found on his blog: bishopfisher.wordpress.com. Prior to ordination, he was a CPA and the CFO of a benefits and trust company. With a focus on physical wellness, Jeff enjoys working out regularly at his local gym. As empty nesters, he and his wife, Susan, like to snuggle with their beloved dachshund, Grady, while watching Netflix.





The Rev. Jan Kwiatkowski is an Episcopal priest, licensed marriage and family therapist practicing Telemental Health in Wisconsin, and works part time with the Living Compass team. Jan and Dennis have been married for over 40 years. Between the families of their four adult sons, they are blessed with eight grandchildren who are the absolute joys of their lives. Dancing and performing in parades with the Milwaukee Dancing Grannies, knitting, and sipping almond milk lattes are also a source of life and joy for Jan.



The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner—founder of the Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative—has served his community for more than 30 years as an Episcopal priest, retreat leader, licensed marriage and family therapist, and author. In addition to his coaching and psychotherapy work, he leads wellness retreats for organizations and leadership teams. Scott has been married to Holly Hughes Stoner for 41 years and together they are the co-creators of *The Teen Compass* and the *Parent Wellness Compass*. In his free time, Scott loves cycling, running, and soccer, and spending time with family, especially with his two grandsons.



Introduction

The season of Advent, along with the thoughtful writings and reflection questions in this devotional, provides us with the opportunity to slow down so we can make counter-cultural choices, choices that will help prepare us for the true meaning of Christmas.

We are delighted that you have chosen to use this devotional as a tool to assist you on your own journey. And we are honored to include the voices and deep reflections on *practicing hope* from six featured writers.

In addition to expanding on each writer's reflections throughout the week, each Monday we introduce a weekly theme related to *Practicing Hope*. The theme for week one is *Hope is a Decision*; week two is *Being a Messenger of Hope*; week three is *The Power of Hope*; and week four of Advent is *Grounding Our Hope in God*.

As important as are the daily readings, the personal reflections and insights that emerge in response to the readings are what matters most. We encourage you to record them, either in the spaces provided, or in a separate journal. When possible, join or start a group where you can discuss your thoughts with others.

I would also like to invite you to join our private Advent Facebook group where you will be enriched by your interactions with hundreds of others who are also reading this devotional. Last year participants reported that the group felt like an Advent retreat for them. You also have the opportunity to have the reflections from this devotional emailed to you each day during Advent. Visit us at LivingCompass.org/Advent to learn more or to sign up for either or both options.

It has been a joy to cowrite the daily reflections for this devotional with my colleagues Robbin Brent and Jan Kwiatkowski. We at Living Compass are grateful and honored to walk with you on the journey through Advent toward Christmas.

The Rev. Dr. Scott Stoner



Director, Living Compass Spirituality & Wellness Initiative



Advent Year B	First reading	Psalm	Second reading	Gospel
First Sunday of Advent November 29, 2020	Isaiah 64:1-9	Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19	1 Corinthians 1:3-9	Mark 13:24-37
Second Sunday of Advent December 6, 2020	Isaiah 40:1-11	Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13	2 Peter 3:8-15a	Mark 1:1-8
Third Sunday of Advent December 13, 2020	Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11	Psalm 126 OR Luke 1:46b-55	1 Thessalonians 5:16-24	John 1:6-8, 19-28
Fourth Sunday of Advent December 20, 2020	2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16	Luke 1:46b-55 OR Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26	Romans 16:25-27	Luke 1:26-38

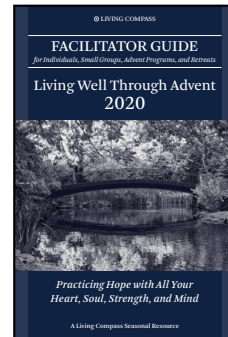
Living Compass—working with The Rev. Pedro Lopez from the Episcopal Diocese of Texas—has also published: *Vivir un buen Adviento en el 2020: Practicando la esperanza con todo el corazón, alma, fuerzas y mente*—a Spanish Advent guide with completely original content by featured writers Revdo. Janssen Gutiérrez, Estela Lopez, El Revdo. Pedro Lopez, El Revdo. Uriel Lopez, and El Rmo. Señor Obispo Héctor Monterroso. To learn more or to order, contact us: info@livingcompass.org.



Ways to Use Practicing Hope

This guide is intended to be used for daily personal reflection as you journey through Advent. Each Sunday begins with a reflection written by one of our featured writers. Every Monday in Advent we introduce a theme for the week related to Practicing Hope. The other days of the week begin with a scripture or quote, followed by a reflection, and then space for you to record any thoughts, feelings, or insights. If you'd like to write more than space allows, we encourage you to purchase a journal to use with this guide.

Practicing hope can also be used by groups. Each week, people could gather for conversation either online, or in small groups if possible where you live. We all benefit from a community of support, and this guide can be used to form or deepen that community. If you would like to use it for a church Advent program (online, or in person if possible), our Facilitator Guide (offered as a free downloadable PDF) provides guidance on how to use this devotional in a small group. Available on our website: LivingCompass.org/Advent.



A couple of other suggested uses:

- Congregations could make this guide available to its members to help keep the focus on Christ during the season of Advent.
- As the resource for an Advent retreat (online or in person). The retreat leader could offer the daily reading as the reflection, or as a starting point for their own reflections. Following each reflection, participants could record their responses, either in the guide, or in a separate journal. Giving each person a copy of this guide would ensure that the experience of the retreat would stay with them throughout the remainder of Advent.

The seasons of Advent and Christmas are filled with the presence of hope, if only we remember to pause and open ourselves to receiving this gift. This Advent season, however you use this guide, our hope and prayer is that you feel supported in your desire to more fully practice your faith in a way that is deeply renewing.

The Living Compass: A Brief Overview

*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your
soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind.*

—Luke 10:27, Deuteronomy 6:5

Living Compass provides tools and trainings to assist individuals, families, and congregations as they seek to live the abundant life God intends for them in all areas of life—heart, soul, strength, and mind. We use these four sections as our compass points to help guide and equip us in eight areas of wellness.

Areas of Wellness

Heart

- **Relationships.** The ability to create and maintain healthy, life-giving connections with others.
- **Handling Emotions.** The ability to process, express, and receive emotions in a healthy way.



The Living Compass

Soul

- **Spirituality.** The ability to develop and practice a strong personal faith, and to discover a meaningful purpose in life.
- **Rest and Play.** The ability to balance work and play and to renew oneself.



Strength

- **Resilience.** The ability to deal positively with the adversities of life.
- **Care for the Body.** The ability to build healthy habits and practices regarding our physical well-being, as well as the ability to end unhealthy ones.

Mind

- **Organization.** The ability to keep track of and make good use of possessions, money, and time.
- **Vocation.** The ability to align our life's purpose with the gifts and talents given by God. This includes work, volunteer service, and any educational/enrichment activities.

Creating resources grounded in the integration of faith and wellness is what makes Living Compass different from other wellness programs. Living Compass believes we all have many compasses that compete to guide our lives, often outside of our awareness. When we choose to make faith the compass that guides decisions in all areas of our lives, we are better able to experience wellness and wholeness. It is worth noting that “health,” “healing,” “wholeness,” and “holy” all come from the same root word “hal” or “haelen.”

The First Sunday of Advent

Sunday, November 29, 2020

Opening Our Hands and Heart in Hope

by The Rev. Cathy Boyd

My formation as a Christian began as a child. My family and I attended a church where the Second Coming of Christ (in capital letters) was expected at any moment. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I say "formation," but "de-formation" would be a better word. This end-of-days sensibility was everywhere: one of our favorite songs in youth group was Larry Norman's "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." The song is beautiful and haunting, but it also wrote an angry-God theology on my heart: "There's no time to change your mind ... the Son has come and you've been left behind." This experience instilled in me an anxious faith, the fear of being rejected by God. What if I accidentally and suddenly became unforgivable, unacceptable to God? It was a religion that instilled fear, not hope.

Thankfully, as I grew in the faith and my theology developed, I later learned hope. I have come to believe that God does not, in fact, want us to be afraid. It is easy to see how passages like today's Gospel reading can encourage this kind of fear-based belief system. But notice that in Mark 13 Jesus doesn't say: "Watch out." He says, "Keep awake." This passage is not about the coming wrath of God, it is a reminder that God is already here. God is with us. Today. This breath, this day, is a gift. Sure, the future is unknown, so that means that now is the moment to keep awake, to open our hands and hearts in hope.

I am reminded of the alms bowl held by a Buddhist monk, a tradition that traces its origin to the Buddha himself. The bowl is empty, open, hopeful. The begging monk trusts that whatever a passerby may drop in the bowl—whether money or food—it is a gift, it is God's provision, and it is enough. The point of the exercise of the alms bowl is to practice hope, humility, and acceptance.

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Gerald May says hope is bare-naked expectancy not tied to a particular outcome. The first Sunday of Advent is a door swinging open on a new, hopeful beginning; it is a turning point. Advent is about looking into God's future, looking beyond the dark skies that Jesus speaks of, and into the light of a clear blue morning.

Hope is not fantasy or wishful thinking; neither fantasy nor wishful thinking has the power to cast away the works of darkness. Hope is expectation holding space for the reality of Emmanuel: God-with-us. Hope is a decision, and a practice. This mortal life is a gift, and eternal life begins now. A thrill of hope! The weary world rejoices. And all shall be well.



Monday, November 30, 2020

Hope is a Decision

by Scott Stoner

*Hope is expectation holding space for the reality of Emmanuel:
God-with-us. Hope is a decision, and a practice.*

—Cathy Boyd

In yesterday's reflection, Cathy Boyd wrote about how her theology of hope evolved as her fear-based understanding of childhood gradually was replaced with an understanding grounded in God's love and grace.

I find a parallel development in the psychological understanding of what hope is and what it is not. A common misunderstanding of hope is that it is primarily a feeling. And, as with feelings, in this thinking we either have hope, or we do not. A more evolved and mature understanding of hope is one that is based on much more than a feeling. Mature hope, as Cathy wrote in her reflection, is a decision. Note the difference between "I am not *feeling* very hopeful today that we can overcome this challenge," and, "I choose to remain hopeful that we can overcome this challenge." We can decide to act with hope even when not feeling hopeful, just as we can choose to act with love even when we do not feel love in the present moment.

Hope as a decision does not minimize any despair we may currently have about our own lives, or what is happening in the world. In fact, it is in the midst of the most challenging times that hope truly becomes a decision. And so we admire people like Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Martin Luther King Jr. as examples of those who chose to model hope in the midst of overwhelming challenges.

Each week of this devotional will focus on a different aspect of hope, and this week we will focus on the idea of hope as a decision.

Making It Personal: What is your response to the idea that "hope is a decision"? Can you think of a time when you acted with hope even when you may not have been feeling particularly hopeful? Is there an opportunity or challenge right now in your life, or in the larger world, where you are being called to "decide" to practice hope?

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Tuesday, December 1, 2020

From Where is My Hope to Come?

by Scott Stoner

I lift my eyes to the hills; from where is my help to come? My help comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.

—Psalm 121:1-2, The Book of Common Prayer

As we continue to reflect on the idea that hope is a decision, we need to consider on what our hope is based. Another way to put this is to reword Psalm 121 and ask, “From where is my *hope* to come?”

Our hope can come from our confidence in others. Some examples of this kind of hope include, “I have great hope that you can accomplish the goals that you have set for yourself.” “I have hope that I can count on you to be there when I need you.” “I have hope that your medical skills and expertise will alleviate my health issues.”

We also can have hope in ourselves. “I have hope that I will complete my studies in two more years.” “I am hopeful that I can help you with this.” “I have hope that I will be back to my old self in no time.”

As people of faith, in addition to any hope we place in ourselves and others, our hope ultimately is grounded in God. These choices do not, in any way, need to be mutually exclusive. And because we know that God often works through others, putting our hope in others can be an expression of our hope that God is, and will be, present to us in and through other people.

And so we change the word *help* to *hope* and say, with the author of Psalm 121, “From where is my hope to come? My hope comes from the LORD, the maker of heaven and earth.”

Making It Personal: What do you experience when you read the first two verses of Psalm 121 with the word *hope* in place of the word *help*? What do you think of the idea that the source of our hope can be found in ourselves, in others, and in God? Do you agree that these do not need to be mutually exclusive?



Wednesday, December 2, 2020

An Instrument of Hope

by Scott Stoner

*Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred,
let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is
discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair,
hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy.*

—From a prayer attributed to St. Francis

Yesterday I wrote about how one type of hope is the hope that we have in others. Perhaps it is based on something they know, or do, or some experience they have had, that gives us reason to have hope. Having hope in another means that we trust them and believe they will do what we think they can do.

Reflecting on the Prayer of St. Francis, we also can see that *we* are called to be instruments of hope *for others*. In the words of this prayer, we pray that we will be people whom others can trust to be there for them when they are in need.

To be an instrument of hope for others is an expression of the theme we are exploring this week, that hope is a decision. This is especially true when we see that, in the prayer of St. Francis, we are called to be instruments of hope when we encounter a situation or a person who is in despair. Speaking only for myself, sometimes, when I encounter despair, my initial reaction is to hesitate to get involved. There is a part of me that identifies with the priest and the Levite in the Good Samaritan parable. Sometimes I, too, have the inclination to walk right on by.

Instead, to be like the Good Samaritan, when I encounter someone in need, I need to make an intentional decision to be an instrument of hope and healing and get involved. Praying the Prayer of St. Francis regularly gives me strength and keeps me mindful of the call to be an instrument of hope for others.

Making It Personal: What comes to mind when you think of being an instrument of hope for someone in despair? Can you think of a time when you have been that for others? Is there someone in your life right now to whom God is calling you to be an instrument of hope?

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Thursday, December 3, 2020

All Shall Be Well

by Scott Stoner

*All shall be well, and all shall be well, and
all manner of thing shall be well.*

—Julian of Norwich

In 1373, at age 30, the mystic Julian of Norwich thought she was dying. A priest was called to give her last rites. While she eventually recovered from her illness, before she did, she experienced sixteen mystical visions, or “showings” that she then wrote about and reflected upon throughout the rest of her life.

In Julian’s thirteenth vision, she was given the words for which she is most well-known: “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

Here is the full text of what she wrote: “But Jesus, who in this vision informed me of all that is needed by me, answered with these words and said: ‘It was necessary that there should be sin; but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.’ These words were said most tenderly, showing no manner of blame to me nor to any who shall be saved.”

Julian’s faith and hope in God were forged in the crucible of great despair. This is not uncommon, as often it is a journey through great trial and challenge that deepens our faith and hope in God.

Julian’s simple assurance that Jesus will make all things right and “all shall be well”—no matter how disturbed or troubled they may currently be—has provided hope to millions of people for over six hundred years. Now that’s an example of what we reflected on yesterday, being an instrument of hope for others.

Making It Personal: Slowly reread the full text above of Julian of Norwich. What do you feel in response to these words? Have you experienced a journey of great trial and challenge that ultimately deepened your hope that in God, all shall be well? Are you experiencing anything like that now?



Friday, December 4, 2020

Light One Candle

by Scott Stoner

It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

—Anonymous

Have you ever found yourself, perhaps when the power has gone out at night, in a completely dark room where you can hardly see at all? Now imagine yourself in that same situation but with a single candle and some matches. You light the candle and then, what happens? You likely are amazed at the power that one single candle has to dispel the darkness.

Candles are an essential part of our celebration of Advent (just as they are for Hanukkah, which our Jewish sisters and brothers will celebrate starting next Thursday). Churches, and many homes, have Advent wreaths with candles to mark the four weeks of Advent and then Christmas. These candles are signs of hope, signs of the light of Christ coming into the darkness of the world. They also remind us that the darkness cannot overcome the light.

It has been said that “it is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.” I know that ultimately to be true, but I have to admit that in the darkness that is all too real in our world, I often struggle not to get stuck wringing my hands and cursing the darkness. This is another one of those times when hope can be a decision, an act of the will, an intentional choice to find a way to light one candle rather than to curse and complain about the darkness.

Despair is real. It is powerful. However, the power of love and hope are even greater.

Making It Personal: What response do you have to the saying, “It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness”? Do you ever find yourself cursing and complaining about all that is wrong in the world? You might want to light a candle in the darkness and then take a few minutes to reflect on one thing you can do to be a light of love and hope for others in your corner of the world.

THE FIRST WEEK OF ADVENT

Saturday, December 5, 2020

Keep Awake, Arrive Alive

by Scott Stoner

What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.

—Mark 13:37

“Arrive alive—avoid drowsy driving.” These words, from an electronic highway sign I passed recently, could have been written by John the Baptist if he were alive today. In last Sunday’s Gospel, he calls us to “keep alert,” and, “What I say to you all: Keep awake.”

Drowsy driving is a serious problem. The National Highway Safety Administration estimates that every year at least 100,000 automobile accidents result from driver fatigue. One of the symptoms of drowsy driving is that we arrive at our destination with little conscious awareness of how we got there, missing the sights along the way, the corners turned, and the sounds and voices heard. By extension, if we are not careful, we can have the same experience as we “drive” our way toward Christmas.

The dominant compass of the culture, especially this time of year, points us toward an excess of materialism and general busyness that may distract us from the quiet of hope. And this year is even more intense with the continued uncertainty of COVID-19 and how it is impacting everyone in our lives.

Just as we have explored the idea that hope is a decision, we now have the opportunity to choose our direction by remembering that the compass of our faith is stronger than that of the dominant culture. The daily decisions we make over the next three weeks to have our faith serve as our true north will help us to arrive at Christmas fully alive, alert, and awake.

Making It Personal: Have you found, or currently find, yourself depleted or made drowsy by the Christmas season? If yes, is there a specific choice you want to make in order to be more alive and hopeful? What do you need to say “no” to, and what do you need to say “yes” to, in order to help you be more alive, alert, and awake?

The Second Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 6, 2020

Embodying God's Hope

by The Rev. Seth Dietrich

*See, I am sending my messenger ahead of
you, who will prepare your way.*

—Mark 1:2

When I go to a big city, I'm often transfixed by the bike messengers. Even in a digital age, some files are too important for email, so companies hire special couriers to hand-deliver their cargo to clients across town. Zipping through the building shadows, thick, square bags on their back, these messengers carry great responsibility. While cars honk and drivers yell that they are out of place, the messengers keep going, dodging trucks and potholes. Bike messengers often ignore the common rules and boundaries of the road, flashing in between the lanes of gridlocked cars, ignoring the red lights at intersections. I once heard a bike messenger say in an interview, "You develop a sort of sixth sense about the rhythm of traffic. It looks like chaos to others, but for me it is like entering into the flow."

John the Baptist is a long way from being a mounted courier rushing through a big city. But he does bear the responsibility of carrying a critical message: the long-awaited Messiah of God, the Christ, is coming into the world. He, too, is not afraid to be out of place and to cross boundaries, performing this Jewish ritual of purification (baptism) out in the wilderness rather than in the Temple. Those "who own the road," the religious authorities, think John is sowing chaos, but John believes he is moving with the flow of God, speaking in line with God's Spirit, offering a message of hope. God has always used human beings to carry the most important messages. Over and over, the written text of Holy Scripture points to flesh-and-blood people whose words and lives have embodied God's love. The season of Advent calls to mind this long line of couriers: from Jeremiah to Isaiah to John the Baptist, all intuiting a day when God's message of Truth and Love would somehow be fully

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

embodied in a human being. For Christians, Jesus is this full message, the incarnate Word of God.

Our lives, too, are a message. We carry the great responsibility of embodying God's hope in our words and actions. If someone was simply to watch you throughout the day, do your actions convey God's mercy and justice breaking into the world, or would someone hear a message of cynical despair? Some days, maybe it would be a bit of both. The season of Advent gives us the opportunity to wake up to where we are headed and to take a new course. May we enter the flow of the Spirit and keep pedaling amidst the potholes.

What is one act you might undertake today to embody God's message of hope?



Monday, December 7, 2020

Being a Messenger of Hope

by Jan Kwiatkowski

Everything that is done in this world is done by hope.

—Martin Luther

In yesterday's reflection, Seth Dietrich wrote that the season of Advent calls to mind a long line of couriers, from Jeremiah, to Isaiah, to John the Baptist. God has always used human beings to carry the most important messages. Certainly, Jesus is God's primary messenger, and there have been countless others, known and unknown, since then. Do we count ourselves in that long line of messengers, and what part of the message of hope are we called to embody?

This week, we invite you to reflect on being a messenger of hope. How we live that out inevitably varies from person to person, but no matter the person, the place, or the circumstance in time, Jesus is God's primary messenger, and our beloved role model.

Just like the prophets before him, Jesus carried great responsibility, yet was often told he was out of place as he dodged the potholes of his time. He ignored the common rules of the road if they got in the way of God's message of hope and the promise of love. As Seth wrote, "Jesus is this full message." Jesus is our hope.

The urgency of Advent's message of hope and love in our anxious, hurting world is more palpable than ever. We long for relief and healing. Individually and collectively, as messengers, we can feel paralyzingly stuck, definitely not in the flow, dodging potholes, and wondering why God is taking so long. Bearing a message of hope when we ourselves are struggling to hold onto the message ourselves is hard, but it is a decision and a commitment that will offer comfort and hope to those around us.

Making It Personal: Where's your place in the long line of God's messengers of hope? How do you see yourself as a faithful messenger? What does the phrase "messenger of hope" mean to you?

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

Tuesday, December 8, 2020

Hope Carries Risk

by Jan Kwiatkowski

Preach the Gospel always. Use words when necessary.

—Attributed to St. Francis of Assisi

In 2020, it doesn't require much effort for us to send messages. We have handheld devices of all sorts that allow us to send messages instantly. We don't often have to think much about the message; just punch in a few letters, maybe copy and paste, hit send, and the message is on its way.

The prophets, though, had to work a lot harder to convey their messages. One day it seems, they were living their lives, and the next, God hit the send button (also known as feet), and off they went without the safety, anonymity, and the distance of cyberspace that we have. Being God's messenger was not for the faint of heart.

Whether messages are easily sent or require a lot of time and effort, sending messages carries risk. We can't always be sure how a message will be received. We've probably all had the experience when we've sent what we thought was a simple, harmless message, but because the tone of voice, inflection, and other nonverbal cues were missing, the message was not well-received. Even having the use of tone of voice, inflection, and non-verbal cues, the prophets' messages were not always well-received either.

Answering God's call to be a messenger of hope requires risk and letting go of the outcome. The message is God's, not ours, and we take the risk of being pointed out for being out of place for that reason. We are asked to take our place in the long line of those who learned to let go of the outcome and deliver the message of love and hope.

Making It Personal: Does the way you live reflect the Advent message of hope, using words only when necessary? How might God be nudging you to be a messenger of hope this Advent? What might be some risks in extending God's message of hope at this particular time?



Wednesday, December 9, 2020

Hopeful Waiting

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*Waiting acknowledges that we are not prime movers in all things.
It concedes that there are some factors that are beyond our control.*

—John Lewis, *Across That Bridge*

Waiting reminds us that, as John Lewis suggests, God is the prime mover and we are not. Yet, even in the midst of life's inevitable challenges, we can trust that God waits with us.

Every one of us has a story of a time when waiting has been really challenging. Perhaps it's when we've been waiting on a medical test result, waiting at the bedside of a dying loved one, waiting for word on a job, waiting for a child to come home, or waiting for a relationship to be restored. Whether we know the outcome of our waiting or not, waiting is hard. Waiting forces us to acknowledge that we are not in control and that sometimes all we can do is to be present, hold a hand, bring flowers, or a hot coffee, listen, or speak words of hope and assurance that God is with us. Being present in these ways may not seem like much, but it's everything.

It's everything because we have chosen to wait with hope and walk with others in the darkness. As a therapist, priest and hospice chaplain, I've seen the consequences when people choose to wait alongside another, and the devastation when they choose to walk away. Choosing to wait with another is choosing to be a messenger of hope and love.

Making it Personal: What phrase or sentence spoke most to you from this reflection? Have you had the experience of someone waiting with you during an important time? Reflect on a moment when you sensed God was present in the waiting. When it becomes hard to wait on God, what helps you wait a little more patiently?

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

Thursday, December 10, 2020

Messenger Maintenance

by Jan Kwiatkowski

Self-care is never a selfish act—it is simply good stewardship of the only gift I have, the gift I was put on earth to offer others.

—Parker Palmer

This year in my work as a psychotherapist, more clients are noting that practices they've used successfully in the past to manage stress and to keep a positive attitude are not working as well as they used to, or not working at all. Some, convinced that they've somehow failed, further frustrate themselves by working even harder. In the midst of continually changing circumstances, it's difficult to maintain a routine of self-care doing things that enhance our overall well-being, heart, soul, strength, and mind. And it can be hard to let go of what is no longer working.

We mourn for what was, aren't clear about the path forward, while feeling a need to provide support and encouragement for those around us. We get tired, cranky, feel hopeless, and wonder how we are supposed to share a message of hope when what we really need is to hear that same message.

It can feel, and some of us have been taught, that caring for ourselves is selfish. Yet Jesus knew he needed to pray, get away from the crowds, rest, acknowledge his emotions, eat well, and have a trusted network of people around him. He modeled sacred self-care so that he could continue to be a beacon of hope and love for so many. And so do we.

Advent is an excellent time to review our messenger maintenance plan for the new year. To reflect on what is working well and what we want to change or to let go. As Parker Palmer reminds us, "Self-care is never a selfish act."

Making It Personal: What kind of practices or habits nourish your heart, soul, strength, and mind? Do these different aspects of your well-being feel reasonably well-balanced, or is something out of balance? What one thing would you like to add, change, or let go of right now?



Friday, December 11, 2020

Attention and Hope

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we
profess, for he who promised is faithful.*

—Hebrews 10:23 (NIV)

So many events this year, too many to name, have caused unprecedented changes in our world, nation, local communities, and families. We are bombarded with more messages than we can keep track of; more is being delivered than we can take in. I don't know about you, but I've thinned my email, news, and social media lists, and greatly reduced the time spent engaging with them during this difficult time. There are just too many, often-conflicting messages competing for my attention. Deciding what I will give my time and attention to is needed, not only for my mental and emotional health, but for my spiritual health, as well. I also pause more often before I share a post or tweet or forward an email.

Deciding what we want to give our attention to *and* pausing to consider what kind of messenger we want to be, are indeed spiritual practices. A saying we use a lot in Living Compass is “pay attention to what you pay attention to.” We also encourage people to think of the areas of well-being in their lives as a garden, and to ask the question, “Which areas have I been watering and which areas are in need of some water?” This helps us to discover where we want to place our attention, where we want to water our garden.

Advent provides us with a season of time and a clear nudge to pause and pay attention to what has our attention—including the messages we both send and receive—as well as where we want to place our attention, and our hope.

Making It Personal: What might this Advent be asking you to pay attention to? To filter out? If you had to speak a message of hope in one sentence, what would that sentence be?

THE SECOND WEEK OF ADVENT

Saturday, December 12, 2020

Imperfectly Perfect Hope

by Jan Kwiatkowski

*Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.
Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now.*

—The Talmud

God uses imperfect people with imperfect understanding to spread a message we can at best imperfectly understand and practice. We cannot, in our humanity, take in, contain, or express the fullest meaning of God's promise. Only Jesus, the primary messenger, is able to that. God does not expect us to be perfect, to be Jesus. God does expect us to be fully ourselves and to deliver God's message of hope in our own time, place, and context.

As Seth Dietrich wrote last Sunday, "We carry the great responsibility of embodying God's hope in our words and actions." The good news is that we carry this message with countless others who came before us, walk with us now, and will carry the message long after we are gone. On the days when it's a challenge to find hope in our hearts because of the circumstances around us, it is essential to remember that we are never alone.

The Talmud, a collection of writings covering Jewish law and customs, states, "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it." It's the same with bearing the Advent message of hope. It's when it seems like we may be overwhelmed by the enormity of the world's grief, that hope must be proclaimed in every valley and from every mountain top. "The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it" (Isaiah 40:5). We simply need to do our part.

Making It Personal: What is your most important learning or reflection from this week? How do the words of the Talmud quoted in this reflection impact you? How has your understanding of hope grown over time?

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2020

Embracing Hopelessness

Reflection by The Rt. Rev. Jeff W. Fisher

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

—John 1:6-7

Some years ago, I visited Bolivia in order to work with an orphanage in Cochabamba. All around me on my visit, I witnessed hopelessness. I witnessed terrible poverty, orphaned children, women selling almost anything on the street, a toxic political climate, and men imprisoned on fake drug charges driven by the American “war on drugs.”

One day in Bolivia, I ventured into one of the large churches on the town square. No worship service was going on, yet the doors were open. Inside the church, people were on their knees, in devout prayer. With tiny crosses and rosary beads in hand, the people were looking up, with great devotion, at the statues inside, mainly statues of Mary and of Jesus.

The statues of Jesus took my breath away, because they were covered and smeared in red stains to depict blood. The suffering and crucified and hopeless Jesus looked like a macabre Halloween costume. Yet the hopelessness on the face and body of Jesus matched the hopelessness of the people.

In 2017, Dr. Miguel A. De La Torre wrote a book, *Embracing Hopelessness*. In his jarring book, Dr. De La Torre cautions us, when we witness suffering and poverty, about jumping too quickly to hope. He writes: “Hope, as a middle-class privilege, soothes the conscience of those complicit with oppressive structures, lulling them to do nothing. ...”

As a white, male American who is financially secure, I have been blind to the idea that hope is a privilege. Dr. De La Torre opens my eyes to how carelessly I throw around the word “hope” as a part of our Advent ideals.

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

And I am realizing that those who are so full of hopelessness are actually pointing the way to our only hope.

In the Bible, in the Gospel of John, we learn that John, called the Baptist, is a witness to testify to the light. And that light is Jesus, who is our hope.

Those who are filled with hopelessness are also witnesses who testify to the light. And that light is Jesus, who is smeared with red stains, scraped up by religious infighting, acquainted with grief, and oppressed by political power.

This Advent, I want to think less about a cute baby in a manger; I want to think more about how hopelessness points to the light, to Jesus on his cross of grief and oppression.

For Jesus is Lord of all hopelessness. And Jesus is Lord of all hopefulness.



Monday, December 14, 2020

The Power of Hope

by Robbin Brent

*Of all the forces that make for a better world, none
is as indispensable, none so powerful as hope.*

—Charles Sawyer

In yesterday's reflection, Jeff Fisher began by sharing a powerful juxtaposition of the hopelessness he witnessed in Bolivia with the devotion of its people in the midst of their suffering. He went on to connect that experience with the lectionary readings this week: "I am realizing that those who are so full of hopelessness are actually pointing the way to our only hope. ... In the Gospel of John, we learn that John, called the Baptist, is a witness to testify to the light. And that light is Jesus, who is our hope."

He ends his reflection with an unwavering truth: "For Jesus is Lord of all hopelessness. And Jesus is Lord of all hopefulness." This speaks to me of the power of hope. There is an intimate connection between hope and hopelessness. Hope contains the promise of the One who is faithful, and hopelessness reminds us of our need to follow Jesus.

The etymology of our word *hope* means "a strong and confident expectation." This is very different than "wishful thinking." While *hope* is often used to mean a wish, for Christians, hope is a positive expectation of what God has promised, and its power arises out of our trust in God's faithfulness. This connects beautifully with the season of Advent, a time of faithful expectant waiting and preparation. A positive expectancy, no matter the current circumstances or conditions of our lives.

This week we'll explore the power of hope, with an invitation to try some new practices, or to reengage with practices valued in the past as a way of opening our hearts to a direct experience of divine loving Presence.

Making it Personal: What is your response to the idea of Jesus as Lord of our hopelessness *and* our hopefulness? How might our understanding of Jesus as Lord of our hopelessness serve as a bridge to our hopefulness? What practice might you engage to welcome Jesus into the places where you are experiencing hopelessness?

THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Tuesday, December 15, 2020

The Courage to Hope

by Robbin Brent

Hope is one of the Theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not (as some modern people think) a form of escapism or wishful thinking. ... It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next.

—C.S. Lewis

To hope isn't an escape or wishful thinking, as C.S. Lewis writes, but is something that we, as Christians, are meant to do. To believe in a future worth living.

Perhaps the first step is to decide if we are ready and willing to act on our hopes. It takes courage to practice hope until it grows strong enough to be a powerful antidote to our suffering and despair, to offer us sustenance, especially in times of grief, upheaval, and uncertainty. When I think of courage and hope, I am reminded of the hope offered by many courageous people throughout history to those facing seemingly insurmountable conditions. We can draw courage and inspiration from people like Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, Teresa of Avila, Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, and Malala Yousafzai.

Practicing hope is always a choice. It is a daily decision and a commitment to return to our intention to open our entire being to God—not in denial or sublimation of our suffering, but with a faith in the deeper mystery and promise of God's love and faithfulness. Choosing hope will yield spiritual fruit if we are willing to regularly cultivate and tend to the soil of our spiritual life.

Making it Personal: Is there someone in your life, or someone you admire, who inspires you to be courageous in your hope? What prayers, spiritual practices, people, readings, etc. remind you of your own hope? Is there a spiritual practice, such as a daily practice of gratitude, or practicing loving-kindness meditation, that you would like to engage this week? How might you get started?



Wednesday, December 16, 2020

Hoping in the Dark

by Robbin Brent

*All the darkness in the world cannot
extinguish the light of a single candle.*

—Francis of Assisi

In moments of struggle, when hope is hard to find, our practices can help us to remember that there is light in the world, a “light that darkness could not overpower” (John 1:5). Hopelessness is real, but it need not define our faith, trust, and hope in the One who is to come.

Yet, if we can’t fully and honestly acknowledge the problems, pain, and suffering, ours and others, then the hope offered through Christ won’t seem real—it will be superficial and at best only placate the person who is suffering. For example, when someone is experiencing unspeakable grief, and another person offers cheap platitudes, like “God never gives you more than you can handle,” or, “If God brings you to it, God will bring you through it.” We also find fake platitudes in many of the secular messages of Christmas, such as “This is the most wonderful time of the year,” or, “Have a holly, jolly Christmas.” Compounding these are the images we see in the media of perfect families with lots of money, an abundance of food on the table, and scores of presents under the tree. How do we offer an authentic, spiritual hope that is far more meaningful than any secular hope?

This season of Advent, how can we be a light in the dark? Perhaps we can begin by being present to the movement of the Spirit, to be directly and trustingly present, for ourselves, for others, and for God. We can remember that hope is a commitment to trust and believe in a future yet to come. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world.” He also said, “You are the light of the world” (Matt 5:14). May it be so.

Making it Personal: What personal experiences come to mind related to light, darkness, and God? Have you experienced a time of struggle when someone offered to be a light in the dark for you? Have you offered that same light to someone else in their time of suffering?

THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Thursday, December 17, 2020

Hope and the Present Moment

by Robbin Brent

You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.

—Thomas Merton

Jesus said in Matthew 11:28, “Come to me and I will give you rest.” All practices are simply a way of coming to rest in the arms of the Beloved in the present moment. And to trust in the sufficiency of all that is contained in this moment, which is the only place we will encounter the Source of all creation.

It is in the present moment that we are free to listen for our inner life in God. This listening helps us to believe and hear more fully God’s prayer and hope for us, so that our prayer can join God’s prayer. It connects the invisible intuitive world of mystery with the visible world of the senses. It is a bridge for those worlds.

As Thomas Merton wrote, we don’t need to know what is happening or exactly where it is all going. Simply being present can transform our experience and our awareness of mutual indwelling—the knowing that we are never alone. Hope is real. The present moment is real. Hope is not a sentimental wishfulness, but an authentic response to the hope that is promised to us by Jesus. A steadfast, hopeful expectancy that God is fulfilling God’s promise through the life of Christ. As my spiritual director, Liz Ward, often says, this practice helps us move from people who say prayers to people who are living prayers for the world.

Making it Personal: Do you have any particular spiritual practices that are actively supporting your prayer life? What is one you might try? You might want to create a sacred space for your prayer or reflection time. You could use candles, music, a journal, something of beauty, sacred texts, whatever is peaceful and inspiring to you.



Friday, December 18, 2020

When Hope is Hard

by Robbin Brent

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

—1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

The quote above, a reading from St. Paul this past Sunday, invites us to give thanks *in* all things, not *for* all things. This is especially important to keep in mind as we face unprecedented global crisis. Crisis over the environment, large-scale conflict, inequality, injustice, food security, education, healthcare, poverty, and the current pandemic, just to name a few. These can quickly cause feelings of overwhelm and hopelessness.

Yet, the Chinese characters that form the word “crisis” mean both *danger* and *opportunity*. The lectionary readings this week—despite the immense danger and struggles suffered by those we read about—contain many references to rejoicing: joy, praise, bountiful grace and mercy, bringing good news to the oppressed, shouts and songs of joy, and of spirits rejoicing. God’s people giving thanks at every opportunity, for the path forward was one filled with hope and promise and possibilities.

We know that one sure path toward hope is through being grateful. To take every opportunity to be thankful in our lives, and for our lives, no matter the current circumstances or condition. We also know that thanksgiving is a commitment and a discipline, not a quick gloss-over or an easy fix. Our thanks is our way of recognizing that God can bring good out of even the hardest situations, that our hope is well-placed.

Making It Personal: What is the place of thanksgiving and praise in your life, and what have been some of their effects? What are some aids and barriers to your appreciative presence? Do you have a current practice of gratitude? If you wanted a simple practice, you could commit to keeping a gratitude journal and record at least three things each day for which you give thanks and praise.

THE THIRD WEEK OF ADVENT

Saturday, December 19, 2020

Practicing Infinite Hope

by Robbin Brent

We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

On this last day of the third week of Advent, let us explore some practices we can engage to strengthen our awareness of how infinite hope shows up in our lives. We can begin by paying attention to the ways hope has a way of showing up in our lives just when we need it most: in the chance conversation with a loving and wise friend, an insightful article we stumble across in our web surfing, an inspiring passage in a book or magazine we are simply thumbing through, or in an episode of a show that touches us deeply and gives us hope in our own lives and circumstances.

Perhaps we touch infinite hope in how we feel when we see a rainbow, a deep night sky aflame with starlight, a puppy, a beautiful vista in nature. For me, it is my grandson's laugh, sighting a deer, the first hummingbird of the season, a pelican crashing into the ocean, a dolphin's fin breaking the water's surface, or a sunrise or full-moon rise on the ocean's horizon.

Simply be open to all the places, known and unknown, where hope may show up. As Christopher Reeve said, "Once you choose hope, anything is possible."

We could honor all the ways we embrace hope by creating an "altar of hope" with candles, flowers, a photograph of a beloved, a beautiful image/icon, a favorite quote, or Bible, or other inspiring text. A sacred space where we can rediscover and remember what fills us with awe and infinite hope.

Making it Personal: What are some things that fill you with awe and wonder and hope? How was a sense of hope strengthened from those things that appeared just when you needed them? Can you name some? Could you add any of these to your altar of hope? What prayers, spiritual practices, people, readings, etc. strengthen and renew a sense of infinite hope?

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Sunday, December 20, 2020

Unwavering Faith and Hope

by The Rev. Canon Anita Braden

When fear, uncertainty, and heightened risks permeate our lives, we who are followers of Christ cling to our hope that lies in Him. At times it's easy to succumb to the pressure of what we see, feel, and understand. Yet, our God works in ways that baffle the mind and contradict the laws of science. Our faith becomes the anchor that keeps us from drifting away despite our natural understanding of the world around us. So, how do we combat our fears and practice our hope that is rooted in Christ? Let's take a closer look at the lesson for this Fourth Sunday of Advent.

In our Scripture lesson, Mary, the mother of Jesus, becomes the chosen vessel of the Incarnation. A miracle that transcended our human understanding and challenged Mary's viewpoint on human possibilities. Although she did not understand how the miracle would take place, Mary placed her complete trust in God. Through her act of obedience, we gain a greater understanding of what it means to submit to the will of God when the path forward is unclear. A path that seems impossible in the natural, and enveloped with public humiliation that could lead to death. God sent a messenger, the angel Gabriel, not only to declare the coming birth but to encourage Mary on the path forward. The angel Gabriel said, "For with God nothing shall be impossible." Nothing. The Lord, our God, is Omnipotence Immutable, and Faithful. God watches over His Word to perform it. Therefore, Mary took to heart the words of encouragement by the messenger, and so should we when faced with the unknown. Mary's faith and obedience in God allowed her to submit her plans and future to the will of God. She was willing to place her trust in God and not become paralyzed with fear.

Mary exhibited strength, confidence, and inner peace when she responded by saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

me according to your word.” As an instrument of the will of God, Mary exercised unwavering faith and hope in God. She presents a wonderful model for us whenever we need to combat fear and uncertainty. Ultimately, Mary’s submission to the will of God manifested in pure worship to the Divine. Her spirit rejoiced and praised God with her whole heart. May we hold fast to our faith, trusting in the Lord even when the path forward seems to baffle the mind.



Monday, December 21, 2020

Grounding Our Hope in God

by Scott Stoner

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”

—Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

In yesterday’s reflection, Anita Braden wrote about how our hope in God becomes most real when we find ourselves facing fear and uncertainty. When life’s challenges mount up, we soon discover that we reach the limits of only having hope in ourselves or others. At those moments, we discover that our hope needs to be grounded in a power greater than ourselves. As followers of Christ, our hope is grounded in God.

In our Living Compass programs, we often talk about how many compasses are competing to guide our lives, something that is quite apparent this time of year. The secular compass of the dominant culture and its emphasis on the “Christmas Machine” can have a strong pull on us, telling us to strive to make this (and every) Christmas “the best Christmas ever!” I don’t even know what that might mean, but I certainly know that approaching anything with that kind of pressure and expectation is the surest way to ruin it.

As we enter this last week of Advent, I invite us to pause and reflect on what compass is truly orienting our hearts, souls, and minds as we approach the celebration of Christmas. This pausing will also help us reflect on what is truly the grounding for our hope, especially as we face the truly unique challenges of this Christmas season.

Mary faced an unfathomable challenge upon hearing the news that she was to give birth to the Savior of the world. She is told that she does not need to be afraid because her situation is of God. In the midst of her understandable fear, she chooses to make God her compass and ground her trust and hope in God.

Making It Personal: Are you aware of other “compasses” that are competing to guide your decisions and feelings this time of year? If so, how do you deal with that? What is one thing you can do today or this week to help you make Christ your compass and to ground yourself more deeply in God?

Tuesday, December 22, 2020

Hope as Letting Go and Letting God

by Scott Stoner

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things
I cannot change; courage to change the things I
can; and wisdom to know the difference.*

—Reinhold Niebuhr

Grounding our hope in God means making God the ultimate foundation of our lives. To do this almost always involves some process of letting go. Sometimes letting go is a decision we choose to make proactively; other times is a choice that we make in response to a loss outside of our control. Either way, letting go is a critical step in the process of deepening our reliance on God as the genuine source of our hope.

Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us that true serenity is found in this ability to let go of our need to control things that we cannot control. The full text of his *Serenity Prayer* makes it clear that as we let go of our need to control things, we can let God be the ground of our hope and serenity.

*God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time; enjoying one moment at a time;
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace; taking, as He did,
this sinful world as it is, not as I would have it; trusting that He
will make all things right if I surrender to His Will; that I may
be reasonably happy in this life and supremely happy with Him
forever in the next.*

You are invited to pray this prayer each day between now and Christmas as a way to ground your hope more deeply in God.

Making It Personal: Is there a particular line in the *Serenity Prayer* that speaks to you right now? While the word *hope* does not appear in the *Serenity Prayer*, do you see it as a hopeful prayer? Do you see a connection between hope and “letting go and letting God”?



Wednesday, December 23, 2020

Tending the Soil of Our Spiritual Lives

by Scott Stoner

Do not be deceived ... you reap whatever you sow. ... If you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit. So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.

—Galatians 6:7-9

My daughter and son-in-law are organic vegetable farmers in Wisconsin. I marvel each year when I see the tiny seeds they sow in the spring blossom over the summer into beautiful tomatoes, carrots, squash, arugula, kale, and much more.

The first season they owned their land, I remember being surprised when I learned that they were planning to do minimal planting. Instead, they spent their first year preparing the soil for the seeds that would come in the second year. They worked hard for a full year, removing all the rocks and restoring the proper nutrients to the soil using only organic methods. They could have skipped this work and rushed to plant their first year, but their harvests would have been mediocre at best.

Jesus frequently used agricultural images in his teachings, including the well-known Parable of the Sower. In fact, it really is a parable about the soil rather than the sower, and how the quality of the soil directly impacts the growth of the seeds that are planted in it. Regarding the different kinds of soil and the plants they yield, he says, “Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. Let anyone with ears listen!” (Matthew 13:7-9).

We will soon celebrate Christmas, God’s great sowing of the seed of Love into the world. May we take some time these last two days of Advent to continue to prepare the soil of our spiritual lives for the seeds of Love that God desires to plant anew in our lives.

Making It Personal: What helps you to tend the soil of your spiritual life? Do you see a connection between the state of your own soil and the ability for love and hope to take root and grow anew within you?

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2020

A Thrill of Hope

by Scott Stoner

*O holy night, the stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth
Long lay the world in sin and error pining
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.*

—Placide Cappeau, *O Holy Night*

This Christmas Eve will be different in that many of us will not be able to attend an in-person worship service. Christmas Eve services are some of the most highly attended services of the year, and so there is a significant loss if we are not able to sing and pray with others on this sacred night.

One of the themes that has run through our daily reflections on hope is that hope becomes most real in the midst of challenging times, when life is not going how we had hoped or planned. We can find solace in knowing that the first Christmas didn't exactly go as people hoped and planned either. Yet, in the midst of chaos and turmoil, Jesus became incarnate in the world.

The words of the much-loved hymn *O Holy Night* speak of falling on one's knees to hear the angel's voices. When I think of falling on my knees, I think of humility. Life has humbled us all in different ways this past year. Perhaps one benefit of the challenges of this year is that it leaves us all more aware that our deepest and fullest sense of hope is grounded in God and the gift of his Son.

However different your Christmas Eve celebrations are this year, may you find a way to "hear the angels' voices" as they speak again of the "thrill of hope ... for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn."

CHRISTMAS EVE

Christmas Day

December 25, 2020

Hope, Joy, and Peace

by Robbin Brent, Jan Kwiatkowski, and Scott Stoner

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace
as you trust in him, so that you may overflow
with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

—Romans 15:13

A blessed Christmas to one and all!
Our journey through Advent of practicing hope with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind now ends as we arrive at the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the source of all our hope.

We have learned that hope is more than a feeling or a wish, that hope is primarily a decision, one that we are called to make daily. Part of that decision is choosing to be a messenger of hope, and we have reflected on ways we each are called to be bearers of God's hope in our lives.

We also reflected on the life-giving power of hope. And just as the opening of John's Gospel reminds us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it, we also learned that hope shines in the midst of, and cannot be overcome by, hopelessness.

Finally, we reflected on the original source of all our hope as we reflected on always grounding our hope in God.

Putting this all together, today we celebrate God's decision to send his son Jesus, God's true messenger of hope and healing, and the ground upon which all hope, peace, and joy rest.

In Romans 15, Paul expresses well our deepest wishes for each of you on this Christmas Day.

*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust
in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the
Holy Spirit. Amen.*

BRÚJULA DE VIDA

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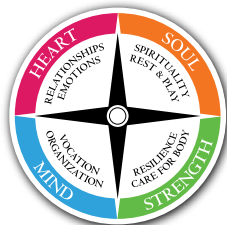


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