



Advent Liturgies for Justice: An LMDJ worship resource

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Greetings from Love Mercy Do Justice!

Thanks for taking time to engage this 2017 Advent liturgy resource! We hope this is both an encouragement and benefit to you and your congregation and that the ideas and tools presented here spur on your imagination toward a season of corporate worship that is steeped in the truly significant story of God with us. In these days, planning engaged and engaging worship is a challenge, all the more so when you desire to incorporate the themes of justice into your liturgical elements and preaching. We pray that these pages help us all consider the way in which this oft repeated story might flow with renewed meaning for our congregations, specifically as we consider the days in which we live and in which we bear witness to the reality of Christ and his Kingdom.

The season of Advent is an amazing opportunity to explore justice and God's intention to make all things new in Jesus. As we rehearse the story of the incarnation of Christ, we do so by leaning into the experience of Israel's longing for the Messiah who would establish a Kingdom of righteousness, justice and peace. That historical longing helps us to tap into our own longings, for a world made right, for a deep sense of new life in the midst of death and destruction, for our communities to reflect God's original intent.

In Advent, we learn how to long for these things in a way that cultivates our hope in Christ. We don't despair, we don't put our heads in the sand, we don't brush injustice and violence under the rug, instead we allow the pain and brokenness of our world and in our lives to nudge us closer to Christ and his promise of new life.

For some churches, the themes of justice come naturally and have been a regular part of your community and corporate gatherings for a long time. It is our hope that this resource is an encouragement to you and reflects our gratitude for the ways your churches have set an example for all of us in creating space for lament and longing for justice in our broken world.

Others of us are just getting started. We recognize that God is a God who calls us to be people who seek shalom in the communities to which we are sent. We understand that the nature of true discipleship calls us to be people who live out the truth of the gospel among those most likely to be overlooked and oppressed in our world. We want to engage the world in such a way that our proclamation of the good news is enhanced by our raised voice against the injustice we see around us. But sometimes, how to engage in that work in a wholistic way, a way that involves our worship, discipleship and community engagement, is not as clear. We are all on the road toward pursuing God's vision of justice and righteousness and so no matter where we find ourselves on that path it is our hope that that this resource provides you with some tangible ways of weaving the themes of justice and shalom into your worship this Advent season.

The challenge is steering clear of the sentimentality that overwhelms us during this time of year. To counter that, our encouragement is to make your planning as human as possible. In other words, in each of our contexts, there is a particular human expression of injustice, etc. These are the people, named and storied, that God calls us to stand alongside in the face of a world who refuses to do so. This resource is offered in a general sense, but we want to encourage you to make your worship as specific as possible! There will be current events, in your city and/or our nation, which will provide opportunities to reflect, pray, lament and cry out *Come Lord Jesus! Make everything new!* in concrete ways. Incorporating those events into your worship is helpful to the entire congregation because the more human and particular our worship is the more we learn to lean into the real invitation of Advent.

We offer this resource, not as a definitive collection of Advent ideas, but as a springboard to your planning and thinking as we enter this season together. We've included examples and ideas for various elements of worship gatherings but feel free to use these suggestions as a starting point for your own creative engagement in worship. May the light of Christ shine on all of us as we worship together this Advent season; declaring our longing that God's justice would reign through Messiah Jesus on earth as it is in heaven.

On the planning of Advent worship- Adam Gustine

Immanuel. God with us.

At the risk of trading in the hyperbolic, it has never been so critical that, as the church, we find concrete ways to resist the impulse to reduce the notion of God wrapped in human form to sentiment or nostalgia.

There are seemingly innumerable influences in our society which would love nothing more than for us to forget the yoke-breaking, empire-shattering power that is the person of Jesus. That God would come to us in Christ; and usher in a Kingdom straightforwardly concerned for those who live at the margins of the larger culture is truly good news of great joy.

And yet, we live in a time of renewed hatred and vitriol. We live in a climate of marginalization and victimization. We live in a culture of un-tempered attack on the dignity of people whose existence is often ignored and overlooked. Nothing serves the purposes of those who traffic in exploitation, racism, and the codification of systemic inequity more than the people of God settling for a docile Jesus and a framing of the advent of God in terms of mere tranquility. These are the kinds of comfortable images of an infant Christ which work to confuse the true story of the Kingdom of God for an exercise in religious nostalgia.

For Christ followers, religious nostalgia renders our public witness impotent to the injustice of our day. We find ourselves insulated from the lived experience of people ground down by the machinations of a society that is hell-bent on the preservation of the status quo.

What is the incarnation of Jesus if it is not an interruption of the status quo?! In Advent we anticipate the in-breaking of God aimed at disrupting the whole of human history which would ultimately defeat the principalities and powers manifested in systems and structures of earthly evil and injustice.

I don't know about you, but I'm tired. I'm tired of watching evil and injustice have its day in the sun, and, stunningly, seem to be celebrated by the so-called respectable sectors of society. And its from this posture of weariness that I find I need this season of Advent more than other years in recent memory.

In Advent, we are invited to lean into the pain of our shared experience and refocus our longing for a shared experience of redemption on the person of Jesus. At the same time, we have an opportunity to hold those longings in tension with the reality that these longings have been met and realized already. Advent hope is this mixture of desperate longing for the justice of God and the sacred celebration that we have encountered this justice in Jesus himself. And so, we wait, and we hope. We allow the longings we experience because of the brokenness of our world to be buoyed by the joy of Christ with us. Not in a way that inoculates us to the pain of our neighbor, but in a way which realigns our lives with the one who embodied authentic solidarity with the poor and oppressed.

Consider these often-used hymns of Advent...

O Holy Night

*Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother;*

*And in His name all oppression shall cease.
Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we,
Let all within us praise His holy name.
Christ is the Lord! O praise His Name forever,
His power and glory evermore proclaim.
His power and glory evermore proclaim.*

O Come O Come Emmanuel

*O come, O come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

*Oh, come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Come, bid our sad divisions cease,
And be thyself our King of Peace.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to you, O Israel!*

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

*Come, thou long expected Jesus,
born to set thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us,
let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
hope of all the earth thou art;
dear desire of every nation,
joy of every longing heart.*

If we were to utilize these lines in a way that reinforced a comfortable, docile nativity; we would rob ourselves of the opportunity to join in with the church across the generations that have allowed the bruises of sin and injustice to surface in our collective experience during Advent. The act of Christian worship is, in part, a remembering of our story. Not simply in the sense of recollection, but instead, in the development of an imagination saturated in the story of Jesus and the Kingdom of God such that the competing stories of our culture seem definitively ‘less-than’ the bigger and more beautiful story of Immanuel.

One of the ways in which we can aid our congregations in living into the story of Advent is to remember the central proclamation of Advent, God is with us. Specifically, as was made clear throughout Jesus’ life and ministry, this ‘drawing near’ of God to humanity was directed at those most vulnerable in our world. Jesus took up residence at the margins of society, living in solidarity with the poor and oppressed and ushering in an era of *jubilee*; a new age of God’s shalom, the fulfillment of which we point ourselves toward to this day.

For those of us who lead congregations with folks who find themselves still at the margins of our society; this proclamation is, indeed, gospel. For the beaten up and beaten down, the God of all creation has taken on human form and come to live among us; taking up our burdens in his own body and setting right the world. And so our waiting and hoping is not in vain, for we have seen the one in whom all things are made new again. As we unearth our own pain, and give language to our longings for God to redeem, that sadness is met with a kind of resilience that is only possible in Christ.

For those of us who lead congregations with folks unacquainted with the pain of our more vulnerable neighbors; this is STILL good news of great joy...but perhaps packaged in a surprising form. In Advent, we might find the opportunity to invite people to see that real life (the life that is really life!) is found in an emptying; a rejection of the wealth, power and privilege offered by the world and a steadfast commitment to take up residence in the same space Jesus did. If we, as the church, were a people who located ourselves at the margins we might find ourselves in the first, confronted with our own bias and sin, but also surprised to find ourselves face to face with the image of Jesus in those we might be tempted to distance ourselves from. In this way, Advent (not unlike Lent) is an invitation to confession, repentance, and re-alignment with the true story of God. What better news could there be than to realize that though we may have distanced ourselves from God and neighbor, that in Jesus we can live a new and more faithful way in the world?!?

So some questions...

- In our worship planning, do we allow our communities to feel the tension of pain in the midst of hope?
- How do we invite people to align themselves with the liberating story of the advent of Christ?
- Are there concrete ways of introducing songs, scriptures, prayers etc that help folks situate themselves in the experience of others, specifically those who have experienced the injustice and evil of our world in significant ways?
- How are we working to draw lines of connection between the social situation of 1st century Palestine and our modern day? Doing so will allow the story of Christ to dawn on us in new and deeper ways.
- Can we connect our prayers and reflections to actual events happening in our streets, in our nation and our world? Can we locate our hope for the redemption of Christ in the midst of the headlines splashing across our news feeds? What might the story of a Messiah who opted to come in weakness change about the way we respond to the events of our day when we gather together?

Scripture Reading/Preaching

**These resources follow the Revised Common Lectionary **

Recognizing that not all of our churches follow the liturgical calendar in the same way, we developed these readings, prayers and sermon prompts in a way that allows for both expressions to access and utilize the tools here provided.

Each week, we provide some Scripture readings that put the themes of justice front and center, prayers that can be utilized in various places in your gatherings, and short reflective essays by Covenant pastors and leaders aimed at helping preachers ignite their imaginations toward justice as they pray and prepare to preach.

Week 1- December 3

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!
2 As when fire sets twigs ablaze
and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!
3 For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.
4 Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.
5 You come to the help of those who gladly do right,
who remember your ways.

But when we continued to sin against them,
you were angry.
How then can we be saved?
6 All of us have become like one who is unclean,
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf,
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
7 No one calls on your name
or strives to lay hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us
and have given us over to our sins.
8 Yet you, Lord, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
9 Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord;
do not remember our sins forever.
Oh, look on us, we pray,
for we are all your people.

Preaching Prompt- Cindy Wu

It's the most wonderful time of the year! Culturally, there is so much to look forward to during Advent: the tree, the gifts, the parties, not to mention holiday music, feasts, and, especially, pumpkin pie. Why, then, would we kick off Advent with a lament containing words like "filth", "shrivel", and "angry"?

Because theologically, as the prophet Isaiah reminds us, Advent is about so much more than sentimentality. Advent is about a deep-seated longing for the Kingdom of God and the return of Christ, about a future time when wrong will be made right and all God's promises will be fulfilled.

Isaiah 64 starts off with a cry to God Almighty to show up powerfully and set things right: "Rend the heavens! God, intervene and humiliate our enemies! Reveal yourself!" If only God would rend the heavens and move the earth, the nations would surely know that he is God. I've often wanted God to do that, to show up in such a big and flashy way that no one could deny him ever again. I've wanted him to do something impressive so that all the evildoers in the world would immediately repent and work for justice instead of evil.

When I read the first lines of this passage and noticed the creation imagery of mountains trembling, fire blazing, and water boiling, I could not help but recall the recent tragedies of the Mexico earthquakes, California fires, and Gulf Coast flooding (where water did not boil, but it did roil). Creation was groaning loudly! Do not catastrophes reveal the sovereignty of God and the finiteness of man? Shouldn't suffering and devastation cause the nations to quake with the fear of the Lord, and then repent?

But it doesn't always work like that. After natural disasters I marvel at how quickly we move on, how quickly the world (myself included) goes back to mundane and sometimes inane things. The lamenter cries out, "No one calls on

your name or strives to lay hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us and made us waste away because of our sins (v. 7).” In the face of suffering, the feeling of abandonment by God only magnifies the pain.

So, what do we do?

Repentance is key. Isaiah laments not only suffering but also the lack of contrition on the part of God’s people: “But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry. How then can we be saved? All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (v. 5-6). In our sin, we cannot eradicate sin, so any entreaty for deliverance must be followed by repentance: “If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land” (2 Chron. 7:14).

Charles Spurgeon once preached, “Our prayers have stains in them, our faith is mixed with unbelief, our repentance is not so tender as it should be, our communion is distant and interrupted. We cannot pray without sinning, and there is filth even in our tears.” We must ask God to show us the truth about ourselves. An awakened soul perceives the contradiction in his longings and his actions, and seeks to make them align. Sin only contaminates our best intentions. We can’t do community development well if we hold paternalistic attitudes towards the people we are serving. We can’t reform public services if we don’t care about the common good. We can’t exercise real hospitality if we view ourselves as benefactors. We must cleanse our hearts of the sin that so often comes with wanting to do good things.

Yet in this struggle we are never left stranded in despair. The passage ends with a confident appeal to the Lord: “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father... Oh, look upon us, we pray, for we are all your people” (v. 8-9). Even in our sin and limitations we are still the people of God. God doesn’t “need” our repentance to bring about justice; he can use all the broken pieces of us to do build great things. But there is something wonderful in how he decides and delights to use his people to do his work. He is the potter, we are the clay (v. 8), and we must allow him to have his way in us and in the world. We should derive a lot of hope from the idea that God desires justice even more than we do, but his timing and his perspective are different from ours. His delay might be to woo us to repentance.

The Bible assures us that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness,” (1 John 1:9). With pure hearts, we will be energized to love others, even our enemies. God acts on behalf of those who wait on him (v. 4). God comes to the help of those who do right and remember his ways (v. 5). During this Advent season, let us confess not just the sins of the world, but also our own sins, and find healing in our land.

Psalm 80

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock.

You who sit enthroned between the cherubim,
shine forth 2 before Ephraim, Benjamin and
Manasseh.

Awaken your might;
come and save us.

3 Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

4 How long, Lord God Almighty,
will your anger smolder

against the prayers of your people?

5 You have fed them with the bread of tears;

you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.

6 You have made us an object of derision to our
neighbors,

and our enemies mock us.

7 Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

8 You transplanted a vine from Egypt;

you drove out the nations and planted it.

9 You cleared the ground for it,

and it took root and filled the land.
10 The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches.
11 Its branches reached as far as the Sea,
its shoots as far as the River.
12 Why have you broken down its walls
so that all who pass by pick its grapes?
13 Boars from the forest ravage it,
and insects from the fields feed on it.
14 Return to us, God Almighty!
Look down from heaven and see!
Watch over this vine,

15 the root your right hand has planted,
the son you have raised up for yourself.
16 Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire;
at your rebuke your people perish.
17 Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
the son of man you have raised up for yourself.
18 Then we will not turn away from you;
revive us, and we will call on your name.
19 Restore us, Lord God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Corporate Prayer- Brenda Dock

Let us open our hands
To let go of shame
Jesus restore us again
Let us open our hands
To let go of guilt
Jesus restore us again.
Let us open our ears
to hear your call for justice
Jesus restore us again
Let us open our ears
To hear what we may be deaf to
Jesus restore us again
Let us open our minds
to let go of greed and hate
Jesus restore us again.
Let us open our minds
to release any lies from the enemy
Jesus restore us again
Let us open our hearts
So darkness may flee
Jesus restore us again
Let us open our hearts

breaking down walls we build in fear
Jesus restore us again
With open hands
We receive your grace
Jesus, only you can restore
With open hands we receive your Holy Spirit
Jesus only you can restore
With open ears we hear your pleas Lord, to seek
mercy and justice.
Jesus only you can restore
With open ears we hear the lament of those
oppressed.
Jesus, only you can restore
With open hearts, shine your light in us and through
us.
Jesus, only you can restore
With open hearts may we be connected, as your
church.
Jesus, only you can restore
With open minds may we feel peace reign over us.
Heal our minds, renew our thoughts.
Jesus, only you will restore.

Week 2- December 10

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, comfort my people,
says your God.

2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and proclaim to her
that her hard service has been completed,
that her sin has been paid for,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.

3 A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.

4 Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.

5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.

For the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Cry out."
And I said, "What shall I cry?"

"All people are like grass,
and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the
field.

7 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
because the breath of the Lord blows on them.
Surely the people are grass.

8 The grass withers and the flowers fall,
but the word of our God endures forever."

9 You who bring good news to Zion,
go up on a high mountain.

You who bring good news to Jerusalem,
lift up your voice with a shout,
lift it up, do not be afraid;
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

10 See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm.

See, his reward is with him,
and his recompense accompanies him.

11 He tends his flock like a shepherd:

He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart;
he gently leads those that have young.

Preaching Prompt- Jose Humphreys

The Church: Exercising Two Voices of Comfort for our World

In 2014 my father and I were gifted an all-expenses-paid trip to the Holy Land. It was a dream come true for us, since my dad taught biblical geography at an Assemblies of God institute. However, for all of his knowledge of where the bible stories took place, the soles of his Rockports had never stepped foot on the Holy Land. My father had never seen the Sea of Galilee or walked the destinations his fingers would passionately trace on his rollaway maps.

It was an indelible moment for sure sitting behind my dad with my camera in hand. Dad's arms folded, enraptured with his gaze set on the Sea of Galilee just a few feet ahead. I remember how he turned around in delight exclaiming, "Jesus predicó aqui." Translated, "Jesus preached here." It brought to life the text where Jesus's voice echoed over the waters as he preached from Peter's fishing boat turned pulpit.

Looking back, my father's rollaway maps had only mattered as much as Jesus's voice of comfort was located within its topography. Jesus spoke. Jesus walked. God's embodied presence showing up on Galilean soil with healing and hope, grounded in the contours of human suffering in the world.

Isaiah chapter 40 inserts us into a preview of this coming messiah - God's promise of presence hundreds of years before the Christ event. Israel had lived precariously in exile at the hands of the Babylonians. As it happened, God would send a message through the prophet instructing him to, "speak tenderly" to the exiles. Isaiah was describing a turn of events for Israel: No more woes. No more wailing. Rather, a time to receive words couriered with comfort - a pathway ushering Christ's presence and shalom:

*A voice of one calling:
"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the Lord[a];
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.*

It's almost ironic how one main voice of comfort would be the messiah's cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist. Most of us would not associate this career prophet who wore camel skin, lived in the wilderness and ate locust and honey as a source of comfort.

John's comfort would not sooth the status quo, but name the breakdowns at hand, presenting God's future, the promise that things would be made right. John would herald this Evangelion, good news; engaging his fellow Jews in a message that would challenge, even change their allegiances crying out, "Repent for the day is near."

The good news was even for those who perpetuated Israel's misery. For those soldiers who used a Roman approach to *pax*, peace through power (some commentators suggest these soldiers were either armed Jewish tax-gatherers, or non-Jewish auxiliary troops), he would confront with this message, "Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages" (John 3). I wonder what John's message for law enforcement would be today?

Isaiah's text locates comfort within an ornate vision, with contrasting images and themes: "speak gently"; through a God who "tends his flock like a shepherd"...Who, "gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young and words of comfort."

God's comfort is for the exile. The bullied. Meanwhile anyone who has been bullied or abused might know the visceral comfort of a big sibling with a big voice who runs interference. Yet the gospel does not bully the bully but seeks right relationship through an alternative: The Kingdom-culture of shalom. Of peace and justice, where:

*4 Every valley shall be raised up,
every mountain and hill made low;
the rough ground shall become level,
the rugged places a plain.*

*5 And the glory of the Lord will be revealed,
and all people will see it together.*

This new Kingdom of peace would be for everyone, a perspective that perhaps neither, Isaiah or John could've have known in the midst of the upheaval to come: Isaiah's imagery of a shifting landscape would be a new map and trajectory for Israel. God's shalom would be for rich and poor, Jew and gentile, oppressed and oppressor. In short it is the groundbreaking work of the gospel the church continues to cultivate and voice.

Comfort & Confrontation: The Two Voices of the Church

Today in this same spirit of John the Baptist – in fact, even greater than John the Baptist - the church amplifies the good news in the hopes that "all people will see it together." We need to be witnesses to the gentle voices in our midst.

I witnessed one of these voices in the South Bronx recently on behalf of the undocumented, through the efforts of a minority women owned organization named Radical Health. Radical Health invited two Covenant churches: Promised Land Covenant Church and Metro Hope Covenant Church. Recognizing the distress of the current administration's approach to immigration policy, Radical health organized a legal clinic for those losing their Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). A policy that would allow undocumented persons arriving in this country as minors, to receive a renewable two-year period to work. Showing up to the clinic were health care professionals, attorneys, church volunteers, who together, advised, listened and spoke gently to those vulnerable due to their tenuous status.

In contrast we can speak loudly on behalf of the woman across the world whose bodies carry stories of abuse. The need for a #metoo campaign – confessions from woman who experienced sexual abuse - is a continual reminder of how woman's bodies remain dishonored in our society. And how the "rough ground" in the world Isaiah referred to still needs leveling.

Churches this season can also send their amplified voices in advocacy, along with their funds toward hurricane-ravaged Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, where God's children are facing extreme crisis. Isaiah wrote, "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness, he will bring forth justice..."

With our world yearning for words of comfort, the voice of the church can be a gentle voice. The voice of the church can also stir against the status quo...in harmony, without contradiction.

How might our collective voices pave the pathways for Christ's comfort to break through our world today?

Psalm 85

You, Lord, showed favor to your land;
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

2 You forgave the iniquity of your people
and covered all their sins.

3 You set aside all your wrath
and turned from your fierce anger.

4 Restore us again, God our Savior,
and put away your displeasure toward us.

5 Will you be angry with us forever?
Will you prolong your anger through all
generations?

6 Will you not revive us again,
that your people may rejoice in you?

7 Show us your unfailing love, Lord,
and grant us your salvation.

8 I will listen to what God the Lord says;
he promises peace to his people, his faithful
servants—

but let them not turn to folly.

9 Surely his salvation is near those who fear him,
that his glory may dwell in our land.

10 Love and faithfulness meet together;
righteousness and peace kiss each other.

11 Faithfulness springs forth from the earth,
and righteousness looks down from heaven.

12 The Lord will indeed give what is good,
and our land will yield its harvest.

13 Righteousness goes before him
and prepares the way for his steps.

Corporate Prayer- Brenda Dock

Heavenly Father, you speak of peace that surpasses all understanding.

In the midst of a broken world, continue to remind us of peace only you give.

Heavenly Father, you speak of giving us hope and a future, you do not harm us.

In the midst of a broken world, remind us of our purpose on this earth.

Heavenly Father speak of the gifts we have, perfect and good from above.

In the midst of a broken world, may we serve your kingdom loving each other as you love us.

**Help us Lord, to see each other as you see us. Help us to break the cycles of oppression by listening to each story. You are our only Savior, revive us again, as we turn to you. Help us to be patient and to receive the grace you give each of us. Help us to be faithful to you all of the days. Forgive us Lord as we fall short and we fail. Open our eyes, and let the scales fall off so that we may see a vision for this place only you can cast. In the midst of the broken world-you are healer and we rejoice in you!
Amen**

Week 3- December 17

Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendor.
4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;

they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.

8“For I, the Lord, love justice;
I hate robbery and wrongdoing.
In my faithfulness I will reward my people
and make an everlasting covenant with them.
9 Their descendants will be known among the nations
and their offspring among the peoples.
All who see them will acknowledge
that they are a people the Lord has blessed.”
10 I delight greatly in the Lord;
my soul rejoices in my God.
For he has clothed me with garments of salvation
and arrayed me in a robe of his righteousness,
as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
11 For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign Lord will make righteousness
and praise spring up before all nations.

Preaching Prompt- Leeann Shaw Younger

What, exactly are we waiting for?

The third week of Advent traditionally involves the lighting of the “Joy” candle. There is much joy to be had as this week’s Scripture leads us to consider both God’s promise of deliverance and the fulfillment of that promise in Jesus, who quotes the same passage in Luke 4. The reading of this passage in both contexts brings to light key elements of the passage as well as a key question: In this season of waiting what are we, who live in between the Advent and the Return, waiting for?

Real-life healing for real lives

Written to exiles, this passage engenders a sense of hope as the Messenger describes his mission of restoration in detail. People brought low by captivity and oppression are reminded that the Spirit anointing the Messenger is on their side. Comfort, freedom, even healing will come by way of God’s promised Messenger. The year of the Lord’s Favor mentioned in verse 2, refers to the year of Jubilee. This celebration that was to take place every 50th year was a built-in safeguard against systemic poverty. The

poor, declared the Messenger, were not to be permanent losers in God's society. Restoration and reset in the promise of Isaiah wasn't a spiritual intention or a disembodied reality. Real prisoners, whether captive to others, economics, inner wounds or even grief, would really be free.

In verse 8 we understand that this promise is built on the character of the God who makes the promise. We who follow this God are not warriors for justice or advocates for the poor because we've been knighted by society or a political party. We have been called by the God who loves justice. This is not only the Messenger's anointing; this is the anointing and work of a people known as the people of God

Real life healing for EVERYONE

It's almost impossible for the modern hearer to listen to this reading without thinking of Jesus in Luke 4. It is also nearly impossible to imagine the violent reaction to Jesus after he reads this passage in the temple. It's not the passage itself that enrages the crowd in verse 28. It's Jesus assertion in verse 25-27 that the real life promises of restoration and hope are also given to those outside of the family of Israel. The differences between the original intention of the passage and the reaction of God's people to a word they'd been waiting to see fulfilled give rise a number of questions for a congregation:

Are we waiting for the Messenger who brings God's deliverance or for the one who's presence affirms our choices and preferences? Advent is a time to consider whether our hearts are set on the one who's promised to come. Are we ready for the deliverance He's bringing? Are we ready for the Advent of joy in the lives of the oppressed? Are we ready to make the sacrifices that would make us the agents of the joy that comes with real life restoration?

How does a Kingdom community unintentionally exchange God's mission of deliverance from oppression for a mission of excluding others from the promise? Israel heard the words of the Isaiah scroll and yet, couldn't welcome outsiders to the table of the King. (This question extends through the New Testament.) As we cultivate a Spirit of waiting in this Advent season, how do we wait faithfully.? How does a Kingdom community maintain an orientation toward a Kingdom vision? Such a reorientation costs Jesus His life. What will it cost us as preacher and leaders?

What does the Advent of Jesus mean for those suffering today? One only need to pick up a newspaper or turn on the TV to see story after story of lives awaiting deliverance: some wait in the midst the immeasurable hurricane damage, refugees wait for relief all over the world, families long to see loved ones set free from the drug du jour in your town. The promise of Isaiah 61 is about bringing the promise of God to this life now. Preaching a message of Gospel restoration in the face of such difficult realities prepares a congregation to be the blessing God's people are called to be.

Finally, the end of the passage reminds us not only of the power of God to restore but also of how it's done. The nature of the work of the King according to verse 11 is akin to the work of soil on a seed. Walking in the way of Jesus is not a quick fix. The work is slow and steady. The ultimate results will often be unseen for some time, but restoration is on the way.

Psalm 126

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dreamed.

2 Our mouths were filled with laughter,
our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it was said among the nations,
“The Lord has done great things for them.”

3 The Lord has done great things for us,
and we are filled with joy.

4 Restore our fortunes, Lord,
like streams in the Negev.

5 Those who sow with tears
will reap with songs of joy.

6 Those who go out weeping,
carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy,
carrying sheaves with them.

Corporate Prayer- Adam Gustine

Lord, it was you who restored the fortunes of Israel; it is you who restores our fortunes today.

Your redemption is beyond what we can ask or imagine.

Let it be said in our midst, and in our world, that you, O Lord, have done great things for your people.

You have filled our hearts with laughter and delight, you have written songs of joy over our lives.

We are filled to overflowing with the good things of God, we swim in the great sea of your salvation.

And, yet, Lord we confess that too often we fail to see and celebrate the good things you have done. We trust our own efforts, derive confidence in our own designs, and become arrogant in thinking our capacities are of our own making.

Forgive us, O God, for our lack of humility. For the ways in which we confuse your gifts for our achievements. For the ways in which we have come to believe that true joy is found in consumption, wealth, influence and the other lies the world feeds us inviting us to seek our own happiness. We are not self-made; we are not self-sufficient. We are a people in need.

O Lord, in our quest for happiness and satisfaction, in our substitution of mere pleasure for joy, we have become numb to cries of the hurting and broken. There are in our midst; in our body, in our neighborhood, in our city, and in our nation; sisters and brothers whose tears are magnified by the pain of their experience.

Restore our eyes to see our sisters and brothers. Give us ears to hear the cries of those who bear the divine mark of God but who experience inequity, poverty, violence and hatred.

On this 3rd Sunday of Advent, we remember the One who brought light into the darkness; whose birth was heralded among the ‘least’ and ‘lowly’ and we pause to wonder together about the greatness of God who would take on our form and live among us and in so doing, set us free.

Restore our fortunes, Lord, like rivers running through a desert. May we remember that those who sow with tears will reap with songs of joy. May we be a people through whom the world learns of Jesus, the one through whom everything sad is being undone.

Week 4- December 24

Luke 1:46-56

And Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸ for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

⁵⁰ His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

⁵¹ He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵² He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³ He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants forever,

just as he promised our ancestors.”

⁵⁶ Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home

Preaching Prompt- Brandon Green

Mary; pregnant with freedom, must have felt held captive by the unexpected call to this kind of service. She had to have imagined the coming isolation and judgment. Scriptures say that Joseph was skeptical and had plans to divorce her quietly. Her neighbors were gossiping, her family confused. She had to have been the source of many a great rumor. In her condition; could she, though carrying God in her belly, go to the temple and worship him? Could she, with God in her belly, be seen as spiritually clean?

Carrying God in her belly had to have been heavy; yet, with all that lay before her, Mary sang. Mary sang in the face of her coming pilgrimage, she sang as she stared down ridicule, she sang at the prospect of being considered subhuman, she sang at being destined to poverty, she sang though subject to a social caste, she sang in the face of doubt and rejection, she sang in the face of her uncertain and arduous future.

Her song was like the song of my mother raising three kids on her own on the south side of Chicago--economically depressed, socially marginalized and physically broken, yet she sang. Mary's song had to sound like my mother's wordless groans, as she struggled with the internal tension of her faith and fear. My

mother would raise her voice in worship in the privacy of our home. Like Mary's her song to me; felt out of place, out of context and she seemed out of her mind.

Mary's song was like the song of slaves contemplating freedom--a song that sees the road and its obstacles before them as nothing compared to the promise of deliverance, a song that proclaims her voice will be raised, come what may.

For those who are aware of their captivity, the promise of liberation, the inkling of freedom, is worth a thousand songs. No chains nor threat of death can silence a song of hope. When the songs of freedom reverberate within, we can't help but raise our voices. I imagine a song like this in the heart of every runaway slave, because when you're pregnant with freedom you sing. This is why when I read Mary's song, I can't help but imagine it in the motif of an old Negro Spiritual. I imagine a chorus of voices singing with her, worshipping from their varied forms of captivity, proclaiming the coming deliverance of the lord.

Psalm 89:1-4; 18-26

I will sing of the Lord's great love forever;
with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known
through all generations.

2 I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

3 You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to David my servant,

4 'I will establish your line forever
and make your throne firm through all generations.'"

18 Indeed, our shield belongs to the Lord,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.

19 Once you spoke in a vision,
to your faithful people you said:

"I have bestowed strength on a warrior;
I have raised up a young man from among the people.

20 I have found David my servant;
with my sacred oil I have anointed him.

21 My hand will sustain him;
surely my arm will strengthen him.

22 The enemy will not get the better of him;
the wicked will not oppress him.

23 I will crush his foes before him
and strike down his adversaries.

24 My faithful love will be with him,
and through my name his horn will be exalted.

25 I will set his hand over the sea,
his right hand over the rivers.

26 He will call out to me, 'You are my Father,
my God, the Rock my Savior.'

Corporate Prayer- Adam Gustine

Lord, on this day before Christmas, we pause together to consider the good news of Immanuel, God with us. We pray that, by your Spirit, our hearts might be enlivened in a fresh way to receive Jesus into our lives and to surrender our lives to your redemptive work. Help us to remember that we are not saved for our own sake alone, but for your glory, for the good of others and for the flourishing of your Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. We join together this morning, praying the prayer of Mary, the very first to receive the Christ into her life in hopes that we too might know in a deeper way the One whose mercy extends from generation to generation. Come Lord Jesus.

**“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”**

Benediction/Sending

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
So that you may live from deep within your heart.

May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression, and exploitation of God's creations
So that you may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that you may reach out your hands to comfort them and
To turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless you with just enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in the world,
So that you can do what others claim cannot be done:
To bring justice and kindness to all our children and all our neighbors who are poor.
Amen.

A Franciscan Benediction (Consider converting the language here to incorporate “we/us” and doing the benediction all together)

Throughout the week

As your congregation moves through the season of Advent together, you might consider ways in which your community might live deeper into the longing for justice as a community. Many churches have space carved out for some kind of midweek gathering, and it might be appropriate to focus those times for praying specifically for God’s justice to take root in light of the current events we see all around us.

A simple idea would be a midweek, *Pray and Break Bread*, where your church organizes a simple meal together accompanied by a focused and intentional calling out to God together. You could focus on praying for...

- peace in the face of violence in your community
- real justice in the criminal justice system
- compassion and just solutions for immigrant communities
- local events that highlight the brokenness of our world
- among others