

A D V E N T

2018

D E V O T I O N S

C H U R C H E S F O R M I D D L E
E A S T P E A C E (C M E P)

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A D V E N T I

H O P E

In you, Lord my God,
I put my trust.
I trust in you;
do not let me be put to shame,
nor let my enemies triumph over me.
No one who hopes in you
will ever be put to shame,
but shame will come on those
who are treacherous without cause.
Show me your ways, Lord,
teach me your paths.
Guide me in your truth and teach me,
for you are God my Savior,
and my hope is in you all day long.
Remember, Lord, your great mercy and love,
for they are from of old.
Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, Lord, are good.
Good and upright is the Lord;
therefore he instructs sinners in his ways.
He guides the humble in what is right
and teaches them his way.
All the ways of the Lord are loving and faithful
toward those who keep the demands of his covenant.
Psalm 25:1-10

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A D V E N T

H O P E

These words are an important reminder to encourage us trust in God. No one who hopes in Him will ever be put to shame.

Our hope is for a different reality in the Middle East, for peace between Israelis and Palestinians, for all wars and conflict to cease... We have great hope for a new reality where justice will reign down and peace will prevail.

This hope does not rest in the hands of humankind. This hope does not rest in a political process with the United States at the helm. Rather, our hope rests in God.

This first week of Advent, let us be reminded to whom we submit our trust. Do not trust in the ways of humans, but rather trust in God. Psalm 25 reminds us to put our trust in our heavenly Father, who loves us, and promises us to be faithful in his mercy and grace. The Advent Season is a reminder that we may trust in the one who comes... the Messiah... Emmanuel... God with us.

Join us in this Advent Prayer:

God of hope, who brought love into this world,
be the love that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought peace into this world,
be the peace that dwells between us.
God of hope, who brought joy into this world,
be the joy that dwells between us.
God of hope, the rock we stand upon,
be the centre, the focus of our lives
always, and particularly this Advent time.

A D V E N T I I

P E A C E

“[During] the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'”
Luke 3.2-6

During the season of Advent, Christians across the world wait with eager expectation for the birth of Jesus, the Prince of Peace. While we celebrate Jesus’ arrival and the ways in which he modeled how we are to live, it is no doubt troubling to many how far away we are from the peace Jesus preached. From the rise of white supremacy in the United States, to the continued conflicts in the Middle East, we seem to be moving in the opposite direction of Peace. For those of us committed to a just, lasting, and peaceful resolution to the conflict in Israel/Palestine, and throughout the Middle East; we might wonder if our efforts are in vain.

While many often view peace as merely the absence of conflict, Presbyterian pastor and writer Frederick Buechner reminds us “in Hebrew peace, shalom, means fullness, means having [sic] everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself.” Through the words of John the Baptist and Isaiah in Luke’s Gospel reading we see the ways in which Jesus - through his life, death, and resurrection - came to ensure we have all we need to be “wholly and happily” ourselves. Jesus’ ministry is one through which every “valley shall

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be filled...the crooked shall be made straight...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Even when current events and political disputes make it seem unimaginable, during Advent we must hold fast to God’s promise that one day all rough ways will be made smooth. Each day, our friends in Israel/Palestine and throughout the Middle East are committing themselves to the work of peace, endeavoring to create a future in which all people can be “wholly and happily” themselves. It is through these daily acts of resistance and hope we can see glimmers of the full peace God promised through Isaiah, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

In his letter to the Philippians Paul reminds the church at Philippi, “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.” (Philippians 1:6). As we prepare for the birth of the Prince of Peace let us recommit ourselves to the work of peace--peace for those in the Middle East and peace for those across the world, remembering even if we do not see it come to fruition in our lifetime, God will see it through to completion.

God,

Though peace seems so far away we know you are with us each day, helping us to move closer to your ultimate vision of peace for all of creation. We pray for our brothers and sisters in Israel/Palestine. During times of such despair, when peace seems elusive, rejuvenate the mind and bodies of those striving for peace. We pray for those of us in the United States working for peace. Let us be reminded of the words of Paul, confident in the promise that you remain with us as we continue the work you have started. Be with the leaders of the United States, Israel, and Palestine, grant them wisdom and discernment. Guide them to act in ways that will bring about true peace and wholeness for all your people. Amen.

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J O Y

“Yes, indeed—God is my salvation. I trust, I won’t be afraid. God—yes God!—is my strength and song, best of all, my salvation!” Joyfully you’ll pull up buckets of water from the wells of salvation. And as you do it, you’ll say, “Give thanks to God. Call out his name. Ask him anything! Shout to the nations, tell them what he’s done, spread the news of his great reputation! “Sing praise-songs to God. He’s done it all! Let the whole earth know what he’s done!”

Isaiah 12:2-5 (MSG)

Take courage for there is joy in this life!

For many Christians observing the third week of Advent, they will read the words of the prophet Isaiah. These words call them to give thanks and praise to the Lord God, with a joy that springs forth from God's “wells of salvation.” This good news of salvation became flesh with the birth of Jesus, entering into the lived reality of humanity on earth. Today, this call to joy is in the very practical act of collecting water. “Joyfully you’ll pull up buckets of water from the wells of salvation.” These words remind us that it is the fundamentals of being human that truly matter and are quite beautifully, enough.

I was recently speaking with a Syrian friend who has chosen to remain in Syria throughout the entire civil war, despite many opportunities to leave. She shared about the immense hope she has had for her country at certain points; and the excruciating despair that has dominated her life at other times. While she is certainly not living any type of normal life, she spoke of how people in Syria "cling tightly to life" more so now than before the war.

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They enjoy food more, sleep more, and make more babies. They don't know what might happen each day, and so the things that so often become mundane in life are instead bright spots of joy. The ability to embrace her husband, pet her cat, and watch a movie bring her so much happiness it appears as if she's speaking about exciting, out of the ordinary events. She knows the unending anxiety is harming her health, and yet she feels no other option than to keep her life in Syria and continue living these moments of joy, in the midst of the ongoing conflict. If she remains there and chooses life, then the war has not taken everything. Her daily acts of meeting friends, working on her passions, eating delicious foods when she can, and resting well reflect a sustained hope strengthened by moments of joy, punctuating the all-encompassing darkness. She says it is enough to keep her in Syria for the rest of her life.

This example of one of the millions of people living in the seemingly intractable conflict in the Middle East reveals that God offers us what we need to sustain hope and find joy in the everyday gifts of life. We do not discount injustice in all its forms, but rather celebrate that despite oppression and suffering, we still have access to a true source of joy. Drawing water to sustain life from the life source is accessible to all.

Holy God of the universe, we thank you for the gift of joy. Even when our lives are overwhelmed by despair there is a way to find you. We pray that you would provide strength to all people in the Middle East trapped in conflict, especially those in Syria and Yemen. May they taste from the wells of salvation and experience the freedom and joy in your love. Amen.

A D V E N T I V

L O V E

Psalm 80:3, 6-7

Restore us, O God;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved. . . .
You have made us an object of derision[b] to our neighbors,
and our enemies mock us.
Restore us, God Almighty;
make your face shine on us,
that we may be saved.

Mary's Song

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.

Luke 1: 49-55

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L O V E

As we approach the day that we remember the birth of Jesus, we remember the love that showed up on earth when a baby was born into the town of Bethlehem. The people of God did not need just a gentle or simple love. They were desperate for a love that moved mountains and released them from the bondage that plagued them for generations. While certainly God's love shows up in the quiet moments of life and we can feel that love on calm and peaceful days, so many of us long for a love that makes a difference. An active love that brings justice. A love that elevates the righteous and good above those who work to harm lives and livelihood.

The Psalmist cries, "You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us that we may be saved." (Ps 80: 6-7)

We see this tension we are looking at the battles we face across political and social beliefs at our family and community holiday celebration, at the way we are increasingly divided in the United States, or when we examine the grief and fear that seems ever present in the conflicts in the Middle East. We know the pain and loneliness of feeling abandoned as others mock and deride us. We call out of the love of a God who comes to rescue and redeem us in truth and victory.

This year we have lament. We lamented as aid was cut to Palestinian refugees and Middle Eastern immigrants to the United States. We lamented the deadly attack at Tree of Life synagogue near Pittsburgh this October, which reminded us that anti-Semitism still threatens the lives of Jewish people. And, we lamented not only the move of the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but also the merging of the US consulate that seemed to mock the cries of the Palestinian people and their call for a place in the future of the land.

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Mary, the mother of Jesus, who knew well the laments of a people derided by their neighbors, sings a song of hope when she hears that Jesus is coming. She boldly reminds us to take courage, proclaiming that God has “lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.”

Mary knew that love-in-action was about to show up. This promise gave her courage. Her words can give us courage today to love in those same ways that honors the humble and fill the hungry.

Live into that love this Christmas season as we honor the one who came with love.

Creator God, teach us to live and act in a way that brings forth your love into the world. May we live a life of courageous love in a world where so often it feels that the hatred, mockert, and derision seems to be winning. We want our lives to show the kind of love that sees the mocked and derided and lifts them up. The kind of love that fills the hungry and honors the humble. This Christmas may we remember all the people of the Holy Land and seek ways to live into love for Israelis and Palestinians; Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

C H R I S T M A S D A Y

T H E M E S S I A H H A S C O M E !

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Luke 2:4-18

C H R I S T M A S D A Y

A C H I L D I S B O R N

On toward Bethlehem... The Messiah Has Come!

This Advent, Churches for Middle East Peace (CMEP) chose the theme Take Courage. This past year has marked numerous challenges in the political pursuit of a just peace in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and the broader Middle East. Marked challenges have peppered the landscape of the Middle East: The Palestinian people continue to suffer under a several decades long military occupation; the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has reached devastating proportions and marks one of the worst man-made crises of our time; Civil War continues to rage in Syria; and it seems peace is no where on the horizon.

What does the Good News of Christmas remind us as we desperately long for a different reality? The birth of Jesus reminds us, just as the message given to the shepherds that fateful night... Take courage. Those tending their flocks were "terrified" in the midst of their current reality; but the angel reminded them that Good News had come in the birth of a Savior. Jesus had come.

This Christmas we rest in the joy of the Good News that the Messiah has come. The dark realities of brokenness in this world are not the end of the story; rather unto us a Savior has been born. This Good News encourages us to Take Courage... And in the midst of injustice, we shall not be afraid... but rather, in the midst of injustice, we will continue to diligently advocate for peace.

An Advent Litany

Leader: It is Advent, and we wait and hope for peace and love.

Response: We are on our way to Bethlehem, where Jesus will be born.

Leader: Mary, overshadowed by God, says, "I am your servant; let it be to me according to your word."

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A C H I L D I S B O R N

Response: We are on our way to Bethlehem, where Jesus will be born.

Leader: Mary and Joseph travel and arrive weary and unwelcomed.

Response: We are on our way to Bethlehem, where Jesus will be born.

Leader: Bethlehem this Advent is weary and anxious in the shadow of the high dividing wall.

Response: We are on our way to Bethlehem, where Jesus will be born.

Leader: We in the world have lost our way. We need a Savior and Shepherd and Healer.

Response: Overshadow this world, O God, with your power and love.

Leader: Come, Lord Jesus, and bring peace in Israel and Palestine, and in every broken place.

Response: We pray for your birthplace as we make our way to Bethlehem.

Leader: Shatter darkness with your light as you come to gather, heal and save us.

Response: Come, Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace.

Litany written by United Methodist Bishop Hope Morgan Ward

Note: Ten women bishops on a “Pilgrimage for Understanding & Peace” in the Holy Land in November 2011 visited places where Jesus lived and walked: Bethlehem, Jerusalem and Nazareth. Because they were in the Holy Land just prior to Advent, they offered the following litany as a gift to the Church for use in local congregations during the Advent season.