



How many of you have an Advent calendar at home?
A calendar that counts down the days of December until Christmas Eve.
We used to get the ones with chocolates behind each door –
and all the chocolates would be eaten by December 2.

These days you can get all sorts of Advent calendars –
with a bottle of wine for each day of December,
or jars of nail polish
I heard of one that costs thousands of dollars and has a piece of fine jewelry
for each day until Christmas.

In the church, we keep Advent with a wreath on the four Sundays
leading up to Christmas – perhaps some of you have a wreath at home,
or even candles to mark the season.
As we light the candles in the Advent wreath each Sunday,
each candle is meant to have a particular meaning.
The first candle is for hope.
The second is for peace.
The third – the pink candle – is for joy.

But this Advent, our readings seem to be stuck in hope.
In God's words of hope to God's people, struggling with exile and rebuilding,
anxiety and despair,
hunger and thirst – both spiritual and literal.

And I have to say, lingering in the longing for hope seems appropriate this year.
So many of us are living with grief and fear,
in our own lives and in the world around us.
Many of us feel depressed or discouraged,
and worry for our loved ones and our future.
So much of the promise of our nation seems on the verge of collapse,
as the gap between rich and poor continues to widen,
and more and more people are denied basic needs
such as food and shelter and health care.



So these words from the prophet Isaiah may strike a chord within us:

*Hear, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!
Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.
For you shall go out in joy and be led back in peace.*

Isaiah's words are addressed to the people of Israel on their return from exile.

They are getting what they hoped for –

but it's not what they expected.

The city is in ruins.

They are poor, and starting over is hard.

They are weary, and discouraged, and grieving.

And God sends Isaiah to promise nourishment for God's people –

bread and drink that nourish more than the body.

The bread and drink God offers is God's eternal covenant –

God's promise to be with the people of Israel and bless them.

And at the same time, God continues to set forth God's vision for God's people –

a vision for a world in which all of God's abundance is shared,

everyone has enough to eat,

people live in peace,

and God's chosen are a light and hope for the nations.



In the midst of the season of Advent –

when the culture around us is already moving at warp speed into

Christmas – it is important that we listen to this invitation from God.

Come. Listen. Seek. Return.

We are reminded that what makes Christmas

is not the baking and the wrapping and the concerts and the cookies,

but the promise and the hope of a savior.

Listen – the voice of God can be heard

beneath the soundtrack of never-ending carols and commercials.

We can do all the things, if we don't let them exhaust us.

they are special, and fun, and only once a year after all.

Or we can sit out from all the things, if we choose.

And however else we spend these days, God invites us to come.

To listen.

To remember, in our celebration and our stillness,
what really matters in this season – which is love, and hope, and peace.



I noticed something as we read this text aloud in Bible study on Thursday.
I started circling all the imperatives in the first half of the reading –
and there are a lot.

Come. Listen.

Come. Eat.

Come. Call upon.

Hear. Seek. Take delight.

These words of God are filled with hope and promise.
And, they also offer agency to God's people who are hurting.

Bible professor Michael Chan writes,

This poem is clearly meant to stoke hope in dreary times. But its author also recognizes the importance of agency, especially in the wake of disruption and trauma: "Seek ... call upon ... forsake ... return".

Isaiah 55's audience was not simply called to wait around for the rain to fall. The poet conjures their participation in repairing the past and constructing the future.

They are not powerless, and neither are they alone.

We also can use this reminder of our agency –
a reminder that we are not powerless,
even in the face of all that is happening in our country and our world.

We have a choice to turn to God, again and again,
as the source of our hope, our courage, our peace.

These words from Isaiah echo much of the wisdom literature of the bible,
which reminds us that we have a choice in listening to God
instead of the constant discord and chatter of the world around us.

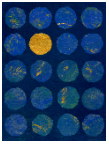
We know from all the prophets that God wants us to practice mercy,
to care for the vulnerable among us.

God calls on us to live in the world as God's people,
to do justice in our communities
and share God's love in the world.

Come, God says. Listen.

Open your hearts to hear my promise, my mercy and my love,

and then live them out in your lives.



In her Advent devotions this week, Kate Bowler offered a poem which focuses on remembering what we can do, even though we can't do everything, and it often feels like we cannot do enough.

It is a prayer, sometimes called *Prophets of a Future Not Our Own*, written by Cardinal Dearden in memory of Oscar Romero:

*We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything,
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference
between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.*

Advent hope, Bowler says, sounds like that—

*unfinished, open-handed, liberated from the need to control.
Our work is to plant, water, and trust God with the growing. To bless what is
incomplete because the future is not up to us, but to the One who frees us to live
and work and water and rest with the most peaceful kind of hope.*

So we come today, to hear the word of God which is our bread,
to taste the sweet milk of song and prayer.

We come to remember that God's presence in our lives
is as life-giving and nourishing as rain in the desert.

That amidst all the trials and challenges of life,
amidst all the extra busyness and expectations of the Christmas season
and all the painful news from our country and around the world —
God offers hope founded in God's everlasting love and promise.

Come! Listen! Take delight!

God invites us to be part of God's vision of abundance –
with our own words and prayers of love,
our own acts of kindness,
our own work for justice.

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God offers the hope that we shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace,
not because of what happens around us,
but because of God's spirit moving within us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.