Week 1: Hope
Longing, disruption and honest reality

Week 1 Prayer

God of the long night,
We come to you tired, grieving, frustrated and unsure.
We carry burdens we cannot name aloud.
Meet us here exactly as we are.
Teach us to wait with honesty. Teach us that hope does not ignore the darkness but rather trusts that you are already at work within it.
Amen.

Day 1

"We wait for it with patience." Romans 8:25

Dear Pastor,
I've been reading our Advent devotional this year, but I keep coming back to a simple question: What are we actually waiting for? I understand that we're preparing to celebrate Jesus' birth, but that already happened. And we also talk about waiting for Christ to come again. So I find myself caught between remembering and anticipating, not sure what I'm supposed to be doing. What does it mean to live in that in-between space?

I've often treated Advent as a countdown to Christmas. But I know there is something deeper just out of my grasp. What does it mean to be people who wait? And what exactly are we waiting for?

Sincerely,
Learning to Wait

Dear Learning to Wait,
When I was a child, as Christmas approached, I had to wait a lot. Waited for the Christmas tree to be decorated, waited for the relatives to arrive, waited for my father's Christmas Eve sermon to be over, waited for my new Western Flyer bicycle to make its Christmas morning appearance. The thing was, I knew what I was waiting for. I was waiting for *something* to happen. Sometimes it happened; sometimes it didn't.

Waiting is more complicated now. Advent devotional guides endlessly remind us that we're waiting for the Incarnation and, beyond that, for the dawn of the promised Kingdom, when justice will roll down like waters, etc. And every year, as the sun rises on December 26, the world is the same as it was the day before. God may have entered human life, but not much else seems to have changed.

A few years ago I began to wonder whether waiting for something that hasn't happened yet is what Advent is all about. What if, instead, we think of Advent as a time for discovering what is already here? What if the *something* we look for isn't out there somewhere, but is really within and among and around us? We tend to think of the Holy One as something far away, over and against us, something Other. What if the Holy One is here and has been here in the heart of us all along, from the very moment we were created in *imago Dei*? What if the Holy One is with us, within us, is us? Maybe that's the real message of Advent.

If you're having difficulty seeing what we're waiting for, maybe it's time to stop waiting. Maybe it's time to seek the presence of the Eternal in the interstices of the Now. Maybe that's where it's been all along.

Sincerely,
Pastor Paul

Day 2

"Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O Lord, heal me." Psalm 6:2

Dear Pastor,
I'm writing this late at night after wrapping gifts. The house looks beautiful. Everything is in place. And I feel completely invisible.

My husband helps a little. He gets the ornaments and decorations out of the attic, but I do the decorating. He enthusiastically attends the kids' school play and Christmas pageant, but I take them to practice and make the costumes. I make the budget, purchase the gifts and wrap them — and he will be just as surprised as the kids when they open their presents.

This year I filled my own stocking. Standing there choosing things for myself so I wouldn't be left out, I felt strangely sad. I couldn't remember the last time someone thought to make and fill a stocking for me. Where is the line between being selfless and being overlooked? How do I ask for what I need?

Sincerely,
Tired of Carrying It All

Dear Tired of Carrying It All,
You have named your grief perfectly: an empty stocking. It isn't the gifts that matter. It's knowing that you've been seen — that while you were thinking about everyone else's Christmas, someone was thinking about yours. It hurts to be always the magic maker and rarely the magic receiver.

Sit with that for a moment, because your grief deserves to be honored. You stand among countless people who carry the invisible labor of making holidays happen.

Our faith tells us that we serve a God who sees. Hagar, alone in the wilderness, names God El Roi: "the God who sees me." Perhaps, before you do anything more, write a letter to the God who sees you — not an inventory of everyone else's failures, but an acknowledgment of the love and labor you have poured out. Your care matters even when the people you love fail to notice it.

Then talk with your husband. Tell him what you told me: "When I filled my own stocking, I realized how sad it made me. I want Christmas too. I want to know that someone was thinking about me. Would you take care of my stocking this Christmas?" It may feel strange to ask for something you wish he simply knew to give. But asking for love in the form we need is not selfish. It is allowing ourselves to be known.

He may respond beautifully, or he may disappoint you. You cannot control that. But you can tell the truth about what you need. The God who sees your magic making also sees your grief. You are not invisible. And you are allowed to want to receive some Christmas magic, too.

With hope,
Pastor Laura

Day 3

Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" Luke 1:34

Dear Pastor,
My grandson asked my daughter what a virgin is because he heard that Mary was a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus. He's only in kindergarten, so she told him it meant Mary wasn't married yet. But we are sure he will ask again when he's older.

I have four children and two grandchildren, so I know how to explain how babies are made. But I don't know how to explain what the church means by "virgin birth." How do we explain virgin birth while still giving him correct information about women's bodies and how babies are conceived? How do we explain that God has done something that is medically impossible?

I want my grandson to grow up to be a good man who treats women well and goes to church.

Sincerely,
Raising the Next Generation

Dear Raising the Next Generation,
What does the church mean by "virgin birth"? It depends on whom you ask, and when.

To Matthew and Luke, the virgin birth meant the fulfillment of prophecy, and they crafted their birth narratives following Isaiah 7:14, guided by a translation that rendered "young woman" as "virgin." Mark and John don't mention Christ's birth at all. Neither does Paul. So Mary's virginity at Christ's birth might not have been a universally held belief.

To later theologians, the virgin birth meant the full divinity and humanity of Jesus, miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a woman. They thought Mary's virginity was necessary to protect the holiness of Jesus because original sin was passed down through sex. John Calvin was so troubled by the thought of Mary's sexual activity that he affirmed, against the biblical evidence for Jesus' siblings, her perpetual virginity.

Which brings us to — well, us. What do we mean when we recite the Apostles' Creed and say that Christ was "born of the Virgin Mary"? To many, this statement means a combination of prophecy, divinity, purity and miracle. But for others, it's a source of confusion. Does making a virtue of Mary's virginity signal our approval for the shame and silence of purity culture? Can we responsibly affirm the medically impossible in an age when disinformation threatens public health? And what might a five-year-old need to hear about all this?

Maybe we could say something like this: Long ago, God promised a child who would be a savior. This child was born not to a mighty man but to a wise, faithful young woman. This birth didn't happen against her will. It happened with her consent, as she said to God, "Let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). She raised Jesus to bring down the powerful and lift up the lowly, to feed the hungry and send the rich away empty. And others felt such healing in his presence that they said, "God is with us."

In solidarity,
Pastor Mike

Day 4

"Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you." Luke 6:27

Dear Pastor,
I know what Jesus says about loving your neighbor. The problem is that my actual neighbor is incredibly difficult. We've had ongoing conflict: complaints about my barking dog, passive-aggressive snubs. He even called the police when my son briefly parked in a no-parking zone so he could unload some boxes. I've tried being kind, but it never seems to change anything.

Instead, I find myself growing more irritated. I replay conversations in my head. I feel resentment building. What does love actually look like in a situation like this? It can't mean pretending everything is fine. But I don't want to become hardened either. How do I take Jesus seriously here without losing myself?

Sincerely,
Struggling Next Door

Dear Struggling,
I once had a downstairs neighbor who would get high and play his bass guitar at 3 a.m. on Sundays when I had to be up at 6, so hear me when I tell you I feel your pain!

There's just one problem: Christian faith *does* call us to lose ourselves. That's the principle behind the idea that "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" that we encounter in Galatians 2:20. When Paul is furious with the Galatians in this letter. I don't write this reply to give you a pat Christian answer but rather to acknowledge that whatever course you take, it will cost you something.

Accountability requires us to love ourselves enough to be truthful with ourselves about whether we are really loving the way that Christ loves. Accountability also demands honesty of us in dealing with those whom we may struggle to like, let alone love. But remember this: Jesus loved the scribes and the Pharisees, and his love required him to tell them the truth.

I suspect you have to tell your neighbor the truth about how his behavior is affecting you, and to do so with *love*. This step may take some preparation before you can do so authentically. Some prayer should probably be involved. And you should also prepare for the possibility that he simply may not care. But even if he rebuffs your efforts, you will have been true to your Christian faith. You will have been honest, with love.

I don't envy you the task, but I recall this point from G. K. Chesterton that might help steel your nerves: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried."
I'll pray for you as you seek to do what Christ calls you to do.

Pastor Baron

Day 5

"Love is patient; love is kind." 1 Corinthians 13:4

Dear Pastor,
I'm struggling with guilt and frustration about giving gifts to my mother-in-law. She is in active addiction and gives no indication that she wants to get clean. Over the years, Christmas has become complicated because she asks for expensive gifts and then returns or sells them to buy pills. My partner and I want to give her nice things, but she won't keep them when she needs a fix.

This year, we're considering giving her something less valuable or intentionally forgetting the gift receipt. We don't want to treat her as if she is less deserving of generosity and love, but we don't want to enable her bad habits. What does loving someone well actually look like when their addiction affects something as simple as gift giving?

Sincerely,
Trying to Love Wisely

Dear Trying to Love Wisely,
Addiction is a thief. It steals not only from the person who is addicted to substances or harmful practices, but also from all who love them and desire their healing and wholeness. You know this truth well. I hear your clear and compassionate intent to love your mother-in-law, even as she struggles with such a formidable barrier to her own thriving and yours.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus instructs his disciples, "I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (10:16). The conundrum you describe – your mother-in-law's insistence on expensive gifts and subsequent practice of selling those gifts to feed the wolf of her addiction – calls forth your own adherence to Jesus' cautionary words.

You are already doing the difficult work of graciously separating your mother-in-law's true identity as a beloved child of God from the addiction that is stealing from her and, indirectly, from you. Your persistence in showing your love for her – as evidenced by your keen observation that she equates her perceived value in your and your husband's eyes with the monetary value of gifts – shows how much you notice and care. In this way, you are as innocent as a dove.

Now for the wise as serpents part. The intentional omission of a gift receipt is particularly crafty, though I'm not sure you'll feel good about that small deception in the end. Another way to show your love for your mother-in-law without threatening her fragile sense of belonging and belovedness would be to give the gift of an experience that you all could share. A family outing, paid for in advance, could create a positive and lasting memory for everyone. The gift of time is nonrefundable.

With Christ's love,
Pastor Austin

Day 6

"Come to me, all you who are weary... and I will give you rest" Matthew 11:28

Dear Pastor,
I can't set up the poinsettias in the sanctuary this year. Looking at poinsettias reminds me of Mrs. Smith's outrage that I ordered them from a different florist than she did when she was in charge.

The truth is, by the time the Christmas Eve service starts, I am exhausted by all the volunteer work I've done. As you know, I am mending the costumes for the Christmas pageant, baking cookies for our at-home members, and chairing the finance committee. I do the invisible labor of planning events and activities for others. The mental load is heavy. I feel so far removed from the "peace," "joy" and "goodwill" of Christmas. I want to be present to worship without feeling resentful, but I don't know how to get there from here. Is it possible to encounter God honestly in that space of frustration and depletion?

Sincerely,
Worn Thin at Christmas

Dear Worn Thin at Christmas,
Mercy. You are holding a lot. I am glad and grateful you felt able to be honest with me.
First, I want you to know I think your "no" is a holy one. Thank you for knowing your limits. It is never my intention for anyone to feel so worn down by their church commitments that they miss the joy in the everyday, let alone at Christmas!

And, yes, I do believe you can encounter God in this place of frustration and depletion. I think a lot this time of year about the shepherds. On the night Jesus was born, they weren't at worship. They were at work, keeping watch through the night, doing the ordinary work that needed doing. They didn't have to finish their work before God came near. I hope that good news rings true for you this Advent, too. You don't have to finish the costumes, do all the baking, or iron out the budget before you're allowed to experience God's presence. Christ comes to people in the midst of their ordinary lives.

Regarding Mrs. Smith and the poinsettias, I am so sorry that happened. I hadn't realized she reacted so strongly. It can be hard to let go of a role you've held for many years, especially when there is grief and change underneath it. That doesn't excuse her response, but I hope it helps to know that her anger was likely about more than the florist.

I am grateful for your steady leadership. I think it's time for you and me to meet and talk about ways the committee members can share that load. In the meantime, know that I see you, and the work you've done matters. My prayer is that somewhere in the midst of it all, you will be able to pause, sense and enjoy the truth that Christ is already present with you.

Grace and peace,
Pastor Elizabeth

Day 7

"Affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame..." Romans 5:3-5

Dear Pastor,
I've been struggling to connect the themes of Advent with the reality of the world around me. The world feels unstable right now. Everywhere I look, there is conflict, uncertainty, and fear. It's hard not to feel anxious about the future.

It's easy to believe we are living in the end times, with wars and disasters happening all around us. But it's hard to see how these things will lead to Christ's coming and bringing peace. When we talk about peace, what kind of peace do we mean?

I want to believe that this season has something real to offer, something that can meet the weight of the world as it is. What kind of hope is strong enough to hold in a time like this?

Sincerely,
Looking for Something Real

Dear Looking for Something Real,
I appreciate your struggle to connect with the themes of Advent amid the conflict, uncertainty and fear that are so present in the world. Virtues of peace, hope, joy and love that we declare as we light candles on the Advent wreath can feel as elusive as a mythical small town in a Hallmark Christmas movie — where, one minute before the hour, the big city woman and small town man kiss with a promise to live happily ever after.

Yet the Good News of Advent and Christmas is not that Christ comes to fulfill our nostalgic fantasies of the perfect Christmas — the best relationship, the sought after gift and the abundant table surrounded by family and friends. No, Christ comes amid loss, estrangement, divorce, or relocation. Christ comes in the midst of a difficult job, a dream deferred or a betrayal by a friend. Christ comes sometimes when we are just plain lost amid injustice, disillusionment and fear.

The apostle Paul writes, "Affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope and hope does not put us to shame" This Advent, may we remember that while loss and pain and grief may change us, they do not have to destroy us. They just might help us see the only hope we really need: a child born not in a palace but into a manger.

God bless you,
Pastor Matt Rich