

Message: “Waiting on Jesus... with Hope?”

“God doesn’t hear us here.” Those words were spoken by immigrant women in a detention center a month ago. You may have heard them. These words strike a chord of loss, despair and hopelessness. It resonates with the unease we all feel during Advent this year.

The worry we’re feeling is reflected in many ways. A popular song which recently spent 18 weeks at the top of the charts is performed by Lady Gaga and Bruno Mars. It’s called, “Die With a Smile.” The lyrics speak to us in this time:

“I just woke up from a dream
Where you and I had to say goodbye
And I don’t know what it all means
But since I survived, I realized
Wherever you go, that’s where I’ll follow
Nobody’s promised tomorrow
So I’m a love you every night like it’s the last night
If the party was over and our time on Earth was through
I’d wanna hold you just for a while and die with a smile
If the world was ending, I’d wanna be next to you
...lost, lost in the words that we scream
I don’t even wanna do this anymore
‘Cause you already know what you mean to me
And our love’s the only war worth fighting for
Wherever you go, that’s where I’ll follow
Nobody’s promised tomorrow
So I’m a love you every night like it’s the last night
If the party was over and our time on Earth was through
I’d wanna hold you just for a while and die with a smile
If the world was ending, I’d wanna be next to you”¹

Many people feel like their world is coming to an end these days.

¹ *Die With a Smile* lyrics © Sony/atv Songs llc, Songwriters: James Edward II Fauntleroy / Stefani Germanotta / Bruno Mars / Andrew Wotman / Dernst Emile

Where do we find hope when life seems hopeless? It's easy to feel like we have little choice in what happens. But that's not true. We can choose what we believe and how we live. Here's an example....

John Shenk worked for World Vision International as a photographer. He traveled to places around the world where people were struggling and captured images to help us wake up to the tragedies of this life. Many people are suffering due to harm and neglect. John said, "I walked down alleys and saw the wounds people bore due to atrocity, and I lost my faith. I went to bed with a troubled heart."

John also said, "But I woke, renewed by faith, which helped me get up and face the day." God's blessings are unexpected, but welcome. John was a very humble man with inspiring faith. He gave credit to God for refilling his soul each day. This makes me think of Paul's writing, "*Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things*" (1 Corinthians 13:7).

And when life is at its darkest, "*...faith, hope and love remain...*" (v13). God is with us. Each year we remember the old story, when the Christ child came, showing us how God's promises are true. Then we relive the drama in the present, inviting Christ to come into our hearts once again. And we look forward to Christ's return, the second coming, when all things will be made whole. God will set everything right in heaven and on Earth. The unexpected Messiah will restore us.

Advent is a season which reminds us we wait with faithful hope. Waiting is hard when you're hurting, alone or feel lost. This is why Jesus reminds us our time of waiting isn't passive. It's active. We watch and wait. We are aware of state of the world around us as we wait. We are in prayer, crying out to God as we wait. We may go to bed empty of faith on some days. But we find hope when we rise and know God is with us for this day, too.

We wait as we rush around doing chores, shopping and preparing for Christmas. We wait as we prepare to celebrate, knowing there are those who are separated from loved ones, struggling and suffering. Some, like military families, are separated by choice. Some, like the families of immigrants, are separated by force. And some, like those in halfway houses or facilities, are separated by neglect.

Advent is more than a countdown to Christmas. Advent reminds us we are heading somewhere. We have a destination as a people.

Advent invites the age-old question heard from children on a trip, “Are we there yet?” This implies we know where “there” is. While a trip to the grandparents’ house may be part of your joy this season, God gives us a different view of where we’re heading. It’s a vision of shalom and community, where all are welcome and wellness is found.

Isaiah faithfully shares God’s directions with us,

“There’s a day coming when the mountain of God’s House will be The Mountain, solid, towering over all mountains. All nations will [go] toward it, people from all over set out for it. They’ll say, ‘Come, let’s climb God’s Mountain, go to the House...

[God will] show us the way [God] works so we can live the way we’re made.’ [God will] settle things fairly between nations. [God will] make things right between many peoples. They’ll turn their swords into shovels, their spears into hoes. No more will nation fight nation. They won’t play war anymore. Come... let’s live in the light of God” (Isaiah 2:2-5, MSG).

That’s the “there.” Are we there yet? Not by a long shot. We have “miles to go before we sleep.” What makes it hard is the journey is filled with danger and disaster on every side. Even Jesus says so in Matthew’s narrative.

Have you ever tried to use Jesus’ words as an answer on a long trip? When will we get there? “Of that day and hour no one knows.” It doesn’t go well.

We immediately have all sorts of questions. No one knows? When are we going to get there? What do we have to do to get there? Do we know if we’re on the right path to get there? It’s hard to know. And we want to know. But Jesus says we can’t know, at least about the destination. He even implies a preoccupation with wanting to know is unhelpful.

Jesus says if we knew, we’d be doing the wrong things. He said, “...understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, [they’d] have stayed awake and wouldn’t have let [their] house be broken into” (Matthew 24:43).

There goes Jesus, using parables again. Comparing Jesus' return to a thief gives us pause. We need to shift our perspective to hear what he's saying. First, the return of the Messiah, the second coming, is a good thing. Not an easy thing, but a good thing. And doing what we can to stop it is a bad thing. Maybe we're doing something that seems sensible but really isn't. Jesus says, if we had the scoop and knew the game plan, we'd most likely do the wrong thing, the thing keeping the kingdom of heaven from coming.

Jesus says this isn't our mission. We aren't called to stay up nights protecting our stuff, or our status, or our political configurations or our sense of superiority, or... you fill in the gap. Those are the wrong things.

If that's the case, what is our mission? If we aren't about preserving our way of life, then what are we supposed to be doing? Jesus gave an illustration, "*Two men are working in a field... one will be taken; two women are grinding corn... one will be taken*" (v?)

What does this mean? It means we are to be about the business of living. We are called to provide for our families. We are called to create a sense of home. We are called to seek restorative justice for those imprisoned. We are called to help those who are in need physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

And we are called to keep watch, which means we're asked to hold this world a little more loosely. We are to remember and to be a sign we have a destination and know we aren't there yet. We're on a spiritual journey and all are welcome to join us.

We are to live with faithful hope. One day God's beloved community will be established, for the benefit of all. God will act. God will teach. God will lead. God will restore. And we have a role to play. We will invite. We will become part of the community. We will beat swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

Did you notice that bit? We will change weapons of destruction into tools of creation. This isn't something God will do. It's something we are called to do as a part of walking in the way of the Lord. Or, as Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (not the peace wishers or the peace hoppers). *Blessed are the peacemakers.*

Have we changed any swords lately? Or have we saved them as a contingency against those who might want to hurt or offend us? Have we kept them as a sign we can rely on our own strength, our own pride, our own stuff to get us where *we* want to go?

Maybe we're asking the wrong questions. Maybe we should ask, who is making the Lord's house the highest priority in our lives? Who is making sure God's will, God's direction, God's vision is the center of our existence every day and during this Christmas season? How are we doing good and not doing harm?

Or, simply, what is the source of our hope?

A Swahili expression says it well: Panap nia, njia hupatikana.

It means, "Where there is hope, there is a way." There is hope in faith and the courage to act when people are in need.

Who is helping to give the ones suffering faithful hope? I think it's a joint task: God and us together, speaking and listening, teaching and learning, coming and hoping, waiting and acting.

What are we waiting for? We aren't there yet. Come, Lord Jesus.

Let us pray ...

Isaiah 2:2-5 (CEB)

In the days to come the mountain of the Lord's house will be the highest of the mountains. It will be lifted above the hills; peoples will stream to it. Many nations will go and say, "Come, let's go up to the Lord's mountain, to the house of Jacob's God so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in God's paths." Instruction will come from Zion; the Lord's word from Jerusalem. God will judge between the nations, and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war. Come, house of Jacob, let's walk by the Lord's light.

Matthew 24:36-44 (CEB)

But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One. In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. They didn't know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One will be like that. At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left. Therefore, stay alert! You don't know what day the Lord is coming. But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn't allow the thief to break into his house. Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don't know.