

AN ADVENT DEVOTIONAL



What do you fear?

INSISTING ON HOPE THIS ADVENT

Art, Poetry, &
Reflections
for Advent

 *Sanctified Art*
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What do you fear?
INSISTING ON HOPE THIS ADVENT

A Step Toward Home

I will not tell you to buck up,
to tough it out, to ignore the fear
rattling around in your chest.
I will not tell you that *all shall be well*
or that morning will come quickly.
I will not ask you to march into danger
without first repeating your name in my prayers.
But if fear stops you in your tracks,
if fear makes it hard to breathe,
hard to move,
hard to think,
then I will remind you
that even one step with shaking knees
is a step toward home.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed



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Luke's Gospel begins the story of Jesus with this opening line: "In the time of Herod. . ." This detail may seem minor to modern readers; however, it reveals layers of information about the fearful world Jesus entered, one filled with rampant oppression, economic disparity, uncertainty, and instability. A world not so unlike our own. And yet, throughout the stories of Christ's birth, we hear the whispers of angels delivering a surprising message: "Do not fear." When Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the magi are each called into God's redemptive story, they do not deny their fears—they move through them. They ask questions, hold fast to courage, trust in good news, and say, "Here I am, Lord." When we find ourselves in fearful times, can we acknowledge our fears while also insisting on hope?

This Advent devotional takes seriously the angels' message and trusts that Christ's birth truly is good news of great joy for all people. The weekly art and reflections look closely at the fear and terror looming in the background during the time of King Herod and invite us to consider the fears we hold now. Fear can divide and paralyze us and even be used as a tool for oppression. But what if we formed a different relationship with fear? Can we acknowledge fear without letting it rule us? Might we catalyze our fears into love and action? What if naming our fears helps us see more clearly how God is breaking in and where God is at work?

Each week of this devotional offers art, reflections, poetry, and hymns to give you hope in a fearful world. As you journey through this season, may your hope become gritty and resilient. May you remember: hope that trembles is still hope. This season, let us insist on hope and trust that good news is greater than fear.

Artfully yours,

The Sanctified Art Creative Team

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Table of contents

Prompts for Reflection _____ 1



The First Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
**IN THE TIME OF HEROD,
WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN**

Poem "In the Time of Herod" by Sarah Speed	3
Hymn "In the Time of Herod" by Anna Strickland	4
Commentary Luke 1:5-13 & Lamentations 3:55-57 by Boyung Lee	5
Art & Reflection Luke 1:5-13 by Hannah Garrity	7
Art & Reflection Lamentations 3:55-57 by Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell	9



The Second Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
**WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK**

Poem "God in the Kitchen" by Sarah Speed	11
Hymn "Looking Out a Prison Window" by Anna Strickland	12
Commentary Matthew 11:1-11 & Isaiah 43:19-21 by Boyung Lee	13
Art & Reflection Matthew 11:1-11 by Lauren Wright Pittman	15
Art & Reflection Isaiah 43:19-21 by T. Denise Anderson	17



The Third Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
**EVEN IN OUR FEAR,
WE ARE CALLED FORWARD**

Poem "The First Step" by Sarah Speed	19
Hymn "O Come, Take Heart" by Anna Strickland	20
Commentary Luke 1:26-39 & Jeremiah 1:4-10 by Boyung Lee	21
Art & Reflection Luke 1:26-39 by Lisle Gwynn Garrity	23
Art & Reflection Jeremiah 1:4-10 by Hannah Garrity	25



The Fourth Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
**WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID,
GIVE ME YOUR HAND**

Poem "Tethered" by Sarah Speed	27
Hymn "We're Not Alone" by Anna Strickland	28
Commentary Matthew 1:18-25 & Isaiah 41:5-10 by Boyung Lee	29
Art & Reflection Matthew 1:18-25 by Nic Faison	31
Art & Reflection Isaiah 41:5-10 by Lauren Wright Pittman	33

INSISTING ON HOPE THIS ADVENT



Christmas Eve | What do you fear? GOOD NEWS IS LOUDER THAN FEAR

Poem "Honeysuckle" by Sarah Speed	35
Hymn "Shout!" by Anna Strickland	36
Commentary Luke 2:1-20 by Boyung Lee	37
Art & Reflection Luke 2:1-20 by Carmelle Beaugelin Caldwell	39



Christmastide | What do you fear? LET FEAR FUEL A FIRE FOR JUSTICE

Poem "Until We Reach the Sun" by Sarah Speed	41
Hymn "Let the Fires of Justice Grow" by Anna Strickland	42
Commentary Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23 by Boyung Lee	43
Art & Reflection Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23 by T. Denise Anderson	45



Epiphany Sunday | What do you fear? FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

Poem "Choices to Make" by Sarah Speed	47
Hymn "We've Seen God's Face" by Anna Strickland	48
Commentary Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18 by Boyung Lee	49
Art & Reflection Matthew 2:1-12, 16-18 by Nic Faison	51



Prompts for reflection



IN THE TIME OF HEROD, WE LONG FOR GOD TO BREAK IN

As you enter the Advent season, what deep longings do you hold? Offer these yearnings and desires to God and trust that God hears and holds each one.



WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE, GOD IS AT WORK

Name what makes you feel hopeless. Offer your emptied hope to God. Then name where you perceive the unfolding of God's dreams. What do you hear? What do you see?



EVEN IN OUR FEAR, WE ARE CALLED FORWARD

Reflect on a time when you said "yes" to an invitation that scared you. How did you move through your fears? What did you learn or gain through that process?



WHEN YOU'RE AFRAID, GIVE ME YOUR HAND

When have you been a companion to someone through a fearful and challenging time? When has someone offered you the gift of accompaniment?

Throughout the season, return to these prompts to reflect on the weekly themes in this series. Use these questions to guide your journaling or discussions with others.



GOOD NEWS IS LOUDER THAN FEAR

Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee writes: "In a world where fear is curated and fed to us, proclaiming good news is a countercultural act." What joyful, good news do you want to lift up today?



LET FEAR FUEL A FIRE FOR JUSTICE

Reflect on a time when fear protected you from danger. As you enter a new year, commit to one action you can take to make the world more safe and just for everyone.



FEAR DOESN'T STOP US

List all of the fears that are bubbling up for you right now. Are there any that are holding you back or keeping you from living fully? Which fears are you acknowledging and moving through? Which fears might be at the threshold of transformation?



The Second Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK

God in the Kitchen

I called home my first semester of college. I told my mom I was fine,
but I was homesick. She must have heard the truth in my voice.
The ache ate at me. It was a long, slow song, a million tiny ants
slurping the juice from a peach. I was tender and bruised,
in the doldrums of it all. But she could hear all of that.
So three states away,
she preheated the oven. Three states away,
she tossed blueberries in a thin layer of flour. Three states away,
she dusted a layer of streusel over the soft peaks
of a dozen warm muffins. And three days later,
I unboxed a package from home—
a dozen blueberry muffins, a love letter with my name on it,
a reminder that I was not alone.
If you're running out of hope, count to three.
God is in the kitchen. She's just waiting for yeast to rise.

Poem by
Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

The Second Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK



Read Matthew 11:1-11; Isaiah 43:19-21
Reflection | Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee

By the time we meet John the Baptist in Matthew 11, he is no longer the bold prophet in the wilderness, crying out, “Prepare the way of the Lord” (Luke 3:4b).

He is a prisoner—held under Herod’s authority, cut off from the movement he helped ignite.
The firebrand voice has been silenced.

And in its place, we find a question, carried through his disciples to Jesus:

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”
(Matthew 11:3)

It is not just a question—
it is a cry from the edges of despair.

John, the prophet who baptized Jesus and had declared him the Lamb of God, is now unsure.

In the dim light of his cell,
with execution on the horizon,
hope flickers low.
He does not ask for a miracle.
He asks whether his whole life—his ministry, message, and risk—meant anything.

It’s a question many of us have asked, especially when our efforts for justice and truth feel fruitless.

After every protest, election, vigil,
or prayer for peace that seems unanswered—
Did it matter?

Did I get it wrong?
Was any of it worth it?

This is not doubt born of cynicism.
It is the trembling that comes when conviction meets suffering—
when the cost of faithfulness has been high,
and the fruit appears small.

It is what hope sounds like when it’s running thin.

And how does Jesus respond?

Not with chastisement.
Not with a lecture.
He doesn’t say, “John should know better.”

Instead, Jesus answers indirectly—
with the witness of what is unfolding:

“Go and tell John what you hear and see:
the blind receive their sight,
the lame walk, lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them.” (Matthew 11:4-5)

Jesus points not to grand victory,
but to quiet signs of transformation.

He doesn’t hand John certainty—
but invites him to perceive God at work. It is a reorientation toward Isaiah’s vision:

“I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (Isaiah 43:19a)

The empire is still intact.
Herod still reigns.
John will not be released from prison.

Yet Jesus insists:
God's dream is unfolding.
Look again. Listen. Perceive.

What is powerful in this moment is not that Jesus performs miracles, but that he frames them as evidence of God's reign at work—an alternative kingdom not marked by coercion or fear, but by healing, liberation, and good news for the marginalized.

Matthew lifts up Jesus, not as a new Caesar, but as the agent of God's redemptive transformation. Those who perceive the signs understand what kind of Messiah has come.

For those in prison today—literally or metaphorically—because of their prophetic witness, this passage offers both solace and challenge.

Hope in the gospel is not grounded in outcomes or visible success. Hope is rooted in perception—in trusting God is still at work, even when systems remain unchanged, even when prophets die behind bars.

John's question echoes across generations.

Activists, caregivers, clergy, organizers, artists—anyone who has dared to hope in a better world—knows this moment.

The fear that nothing has changed.
The grief that our lives might not have mattered.
The silence from the people or institutions we hoped would transform.
And still, Jesus affirms John—not in spite of his question, but through it.

“Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11).

Jesus doesn't see John's crumbling hope as failure. He names it as part of what makes John faithful.

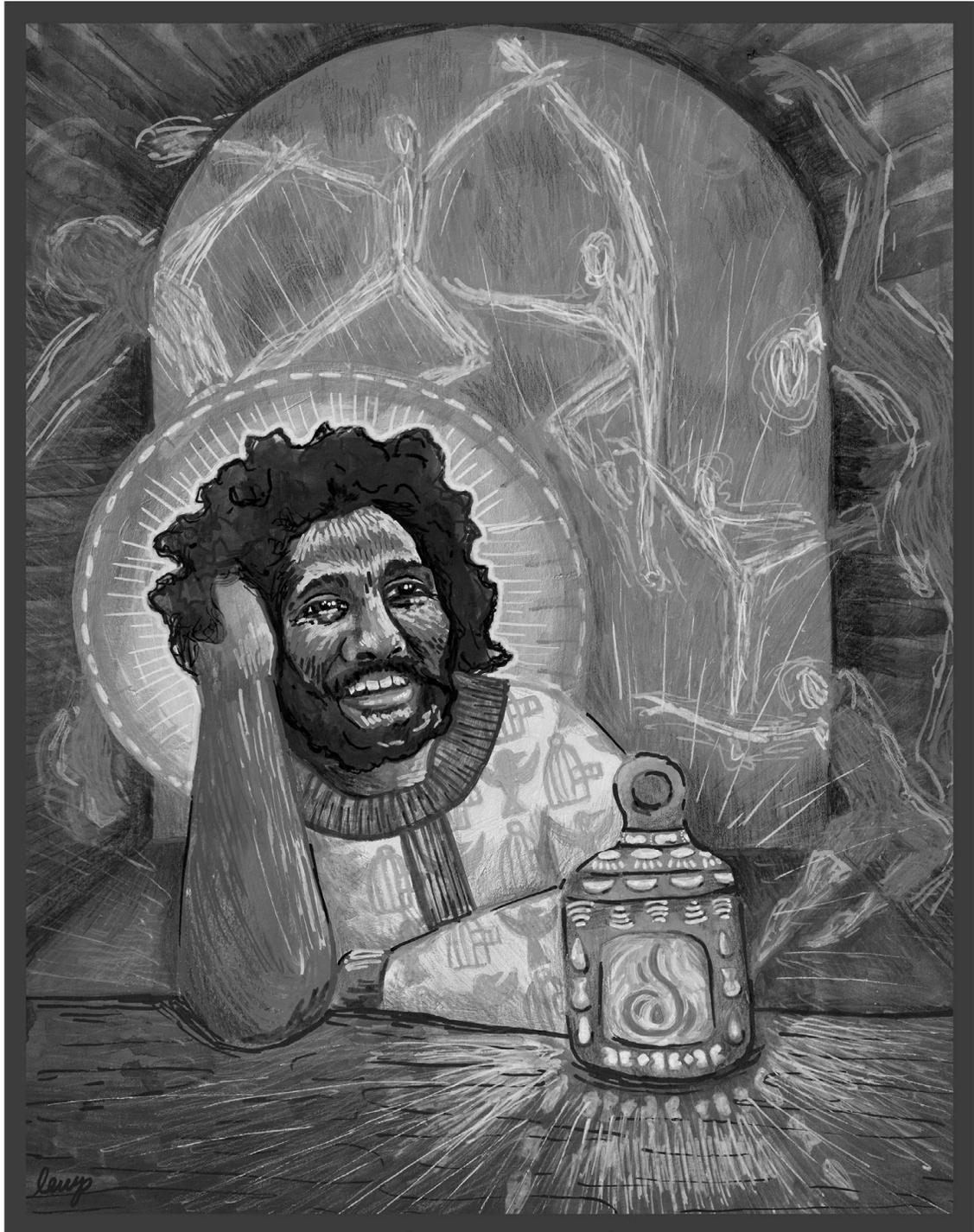
This is a pastoral word for us: hope that trembles is still hope. Even in doubt, John is still a prophet. Even in fear, he is still beloved.

Advent does not require us to manufacture hope. It invites us to bring our emptied hope to Jesus, to ask the hard questions, and to listen again for signs of God's nearness.

When we're running out of hope, it may be the perfect time to ask:

What do you see?
What do you hear?

And to trust that somewhere, even now, something new is springing forth.



Hope Like a Dancer | Lauren Wright Pittman
Gouache, paint pens, colored pencils, and ink on paper

The Second Sunday of Advent | What do you fear?
WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK

Read Matthew 11:1-11

Reflection | Lauren Wright Pittman

John the Baptist was thrown in prison after publicly questioning the legality of Herod's marriage (Matthew 14:3-5). He was not afraid to go toe-to-toe with the powerful, and perhaps he expected Jesus' ministry to look more confrontational and politically strategic. In questioning Jesus, I wonder if John sought a particular answer to hang his hope on, that maybe the Messiah would be how he'd imagined him. Maybe Jesus would bust him out of jail and take things straight to Herod, but Jesus offers something else.

In this image, John sits in prison, letting the disciples' testimony settle in. People with hearing, visual, and physical impairments experience new senses and mobility. Those with skin diseases are cleansed. Those with little material comfort are offered irrepressible hope, and the lungs of the dead are filled with the breath of life. I decided to image this good news through the dancing light of a lantern¹ in John's prison cell. I chose dancing figures because dancing feels like a primal response to the radical healing taking place outside the prison walls. As these six dancers illuminate the cell, I imagine John, even if for a moment, breaking into a bit of laughter at the magnitude of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was quite literally doing the unimaginable. He was removing barriers so that the marginalized were no longer reduced to begging and sitting on mats, shoved to the edges of society. He was not only healing physical ailments; perhaps more importantly, he was restoring people to community.

Out of all the miraculous actions mentioned, the news did not include "release of the captives" (Luke 4:18-19).² With this message, John would know that he was not going to be freed,³ and so, the number of dancers would remain one short of seven.⁴ As we know all too well, God's work isn't completed in Jesus' time. We are still woefully short of realizing the fullness of God's desire for all of creation, and the work is ours to see through. Until then, let us keep our eyes peeled for the glimmers of hope dancing all around us and work toward a day when all can join in that dance of wholeness.

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

1 The lantern has very simplified shapes representing each of the miracles (received sight: eyes opening; walking: footprints; cleansed: bowls; hearing: volume symbols; raised: butterflies; good news: jar and anointing oil drops representing the Messiah).

2 John's clothing includes open bird cages and birds taking flight, which represent how "release of the captives" is missing in the message he receives from Jesus.

3 Bonnie L. Pattison points this out in her commentary on Matthew 11:2-19 in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 1*, edited by Cynthia A. Jarvis and E. Elizabeth Johnson (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 286.

4 The number 7 represents wholeness or completion. This podcast episode provides more information about the symbolic use of the number 7 in the Bible: bibleproject.com/podcast/significance-7/



Something in the Water | T. Denise Anderson
Acrylic on canvas

The Second Sunday of Advent | *What do you fear?*
WHEN WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF HOPE,
GOD IS AT WORK

Read Isaiah 43:19-21

Reflection | T. Denise Anderson

Deutero-Isaiah⁵ addresses a community that had been in exile for a while and had probably resigned themselves to their fate. But the prophet has the temerity to proclaim that God still has something in store and asks if they can “perceive” what it is. That word “perceive” would not let go of me. The Hebrew word can be translated as “know” or even “discern.” Christian churches don’t talk about this often, but one way ancient Israelite communities discerned God’s direction was through divination.

The water imagery in this text is strong and shows up in contrasts (“rivers in the desert” and “waters in the wilderness”). The Holy One is making something out of nothing, providing life-sustaining water to a thirsty nation as God’s “new thing” “springs” forth. It’s also interesting to me that water itself is a tool of divination. To the extent the prophet is inviting the community to “discern” what God is doing, I was reminded of the practice of scrying or “seeing”—looking into a reflective surface like water to get clarity on what Spirit might be saying.

Another translation of “perceive” is “feel.” Here I depict someone placing their hand in the water of God’s provision and direction. Is it God’s hand manipulating the water to send it forth, or is it the hand of someone trying to know/feel/discern the water? A sudden onset of water (like a flood or deluge) can be terrifying, but in this case water is coming to the rescue. What might be scary right now, but is actually coming to save us? How do the waters help us see God and ourselves? By claiming rest, what can we discern in the stillness when we divest from the cycle of fear and turn to the water?

Prayer

Breathe deeply as you gaze upon the image on the left. Imagine placing yourself in this scene. What do you see? How do you feel? Get quiet and still, offering a silent or spoken prayer to God.

⁵ Deutero-Isaiah refers to Isaiah 40-55, which scholars attribute to an anonymous prophet during the Babylonian Exile. It is characterized by themes of hope for the deliverance of the exiled Jewish people.

A Sanctified Art LLC is a collective of artists in ministry who create resources for worshiping communities. The Sanctified Art team works collaboratively to bring scripture and theological themes to life through film, visual art, curriculum, coloring pages, liturgy, graphic designs, and more. Their mission is to empower churches with resources to inspire creativity in worship and beyond. Driven by the connective and prophetic power of art, they believe that art helps us connect our hearts with our hands, our faith with our lives, and our mess with our God.

Learn more about their work at sanctifiedart.org.



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