

On Our Way Forward

Advent Reflections by Deacons of the New York Conference of the UMC

Introduction

The Advent practice of expectation and waiting have a different meaning this year as United Methodists prepare for the Special Session of the General Conference in February, 2019. There are many reports and rumors in the air of what is to come, churning up great trepidation over the many potential outcomes. Could this be a predictor of an end of the Church as we know it, or a sign that God is birthing a new way of being Church? As we approach this Advent season of birth and new beginnings, we encounter an opportunity to consider how we can prepare for God's new beginning in our United Methodist Church.

These Advent writings are reflections On Our Way Forward written by Deacons in the New York Conference. We hope you can use them in your personal devotional time or as a resource in your local congregation.

In this time of waiting, we invite you to join us in welcoming God's holy possibilities to change us once again.

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Hope On Our Way Forward

Rev. Janet Cox

*But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope:
The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
His mercies never come to an end;
They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.
"The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."
The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.
Lamentations 3:21-25*

Advent is a time of expectant waiting and preparation. It is a time when Hope is kindled. The evidence of Christian hope is in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We sing *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus* as we joyfully await the evidence of the coming of Jesus Christ. This season of Advent is even more poignant for us, the people called Methodist. We anticipate the decisions of the Special Session of the General Conference in February 2019 with longing hearts, fears and doubts. There are many questions that plague us, the most consistent being, "what will happen to us?" Are we waiting for our own possible death, or are we waiting for a potential resurrection in our United Methodist Church?

In Thomas Merton's *Seeds of Contemplation*, he tells us: "To hope is to risk frustration. Therefore, make up your mind to risk frustration." To get to the Advent movements of love, joy and peace, we must first "risk frustration." Our journey through the Advent readings will remind us that the people of God were losing hope because they had been long frustrated with the inequity and isolation of their broken society. Yet, the promise of a Savior from a faithful God kept the flame of hope alive. Thomas Merton tells us that faith is not "blind conformity" because "true faith is never merely a source of spiritual comfort. It may indeed bring peace, but before it does so it must involve us in struggle." Frustration and struggle are part of our advent journey, our human story, and the present conflict in our Church. The flame of hope still burns bright.

Hope is the first Advent candle we light in this season of waiting. It reminds us that our hope is in Christ, the light of the world. In this time of preparation, we wait for the second coming of Christ because "by grace we are saved, through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). Faith and hope depend on each other and function in ways that brings a sense of equilibrium, reassurance of comfort and peace. Without faith, the flame of hope would be doused completely. Without hope, faith would not be able to grow. Without faith and hope, we would have no reason to wait and see God's grace and mercy breaking into our world. The Advent candle of Hope reminds us to keep our eyes open and seek God when our world feels dark.

We do not know what lies ahead, but we know that God is faithful and God's mercies are never ending. The writer of Lamentations believes in the steadfast love and ceaseless mercy of God. Let us recall Lamentation 3:25: "*The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to*

the souls that seeks him.” Reflect on how God has been good to you and shown you great mercy. Will you believe that God will show you goodness and mercy again? Will we believe that God will show the United Methodist Church goodness and mercy again?

Prayer for Today

As we reflect and wait, let us enter into a time of hope and prayer:

O God of Promises and Answered Prayers, to you all hearts are open and from you no secrets are hidden. We cry out to you from a place of frustration, doubt and fear. We wait for the salvation of the Lord. You came to deliver us from the yoke of suffering by your birth, death and resurrection. We wait for you once again. Help us to have both hope and faith in you so we will not falter. Let us sing, “Immanuel, God be with us” as we wait with expectation. Let us be comforted in the knowledge that your love for us never ceases. Light the flame of hope within us now. In the hope-full name of Jesus we pray, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

Thomas Merton said, “To hope is to risk frustration.” How have you risked frustration with your congregation?

There are opportunities for your congregation to talk about the proposals for the Special Session of the General Conference. How can your congregation put HOPE at the center of these conversations?

Can you recall a time when you did not feel the steadfast love and mercy of God? How did God remind you of his love and mercy for you? What are some ways we can remind each other of God’s steadfast love and mercy?

Love On Our Way Forward

Rev. Arletha Miles-Boyce and Tracy Moore

...live a life worthy of the calling you have received, for you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them...There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

1 John 4:16,18-21

Each of the four Gospels tells the story of Jesus' incarnation with its own unique emphasis. John opts out of a birth narrative and instead tells the story as a recapitulation of the creation story. Just as God created light and darkness in Genesis 1:1-5, so Jesus brings new light to our world that has been darkened by human sin and brokenness. In his Gospel, John emphasizes the divinity of Jesus and his shared nature with God the Parent. He tells us over and over again in both his Gospel and Epistles that this shared nature is love. Not only does love proceed from God, but as John proclaims, God IS love. (1 John 4:8).

From our Gospel readings, we know John is "the disciple Jesus loved." It is not lost on us that the one who was so assured of God's love would expound on the very nature of that love and the One who bestows it. John goes so far as to say "Whoever does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8). More than anything else, *love* is what defines us as followers of Jesus Christ: "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." John 13:35.

We find ourselves in a time where divisiveness and demonizing our "enemies" is the order of the day. Yet Scripture tells us we are to preserve our unity as Christians, even at great cost (Eph. 4:3). How can we do that and still maintain integrity in matters where we find ourselves in sincere disagreement? Jesus modeled this for us. By willingly emptying Himself of all He is entitled to as God, Jesus walked among us so as to truly be Emmanuel, "God with us." Jesus demonstrates for us how we are to relate to one another by coming alongside us to invite us into a true loving relationship. If Jesus can give up the glory of heaven to better know us and love us, surely we can give up our need to be "right" in order to listen and learn from those who may have a different point of view.

As Jesus' present day disciples, we are the reflection of Jesus' incarnational love in the world. Will the world see the love we nurture and show for each other setting us apart as Jesus' beloved disciples? Will the world see disciples who are more concerned about caring for their Christian siblings than they are about getting their way? Will the world observe us

refusing to let our differences “divide us into little parties which cherish anger and resentment one against another”? (John Wesley, Sermon #75 “On Schism”) Later in Sermon #75, Wesley states, “it is only when our love grows cold, that we can think of separating from our brethren.” In this time of Advent Love, let us practice emptying ourselves of all that could freeze our hearts. Instead, let us fill that space with Jesus’ incarnational love, a love that refuses to let differences keep us separated.

Prayer for Today

Pray a bold and courageous prayer, if you dare:

Gracious God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, we come before You acknowledging the many times we have indeed cherished anger against our siblings. We remember the times we have looked away, pulled away and turned away rather than trying to listen to one another and learn about each other. Forgive us, we pray! In Your mercy, O God, we ask You to send into our lives persons who neither look like us, think like us nor make us feel immediately comfortable. Teach us to have humble and open hearts; hearts that reach out in love just as Jesus did when He stepped out of heaven and into this world, crying as a helpless newborn in a cattle stall, in a faraway time and place. It is in Christ’s loving name we now pray: O come O come, our Emmanuel! Amen.

A Reading and Questions for Reflection

“The Place Where We Are Right”

by Yehuda Amichai

*From the place where we are right
flowers will never grow
in the Spring.
The place where we are right
is hard and trampled
like a yard.
But doubts and loves
dig up the world
like a mole, a plough.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
where the ruined
house once stood.*

The place where we are right, described by Amichai, is a place we have all been to at one time or another. Are you in such a place at this moment? If not, can you remember a time when you were?

How did you feel in that moment?

How long was your “victory” sustained? Did it begin to seem hollow at some point? Why?

How does the poet suggest we approach differences? What might that look like in your life?

JOY! On Our Way Forward

Rev. Kathryn Dickinson

*And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.
Zephaniah 3:19-20*

I was born in 1960 in Meridian, Mississippi to two Methodist parents who met at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University. In 1963, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, my father was one of the 28 white Methodist ministers from the Mississippi Conference who signed the *Born of Conviction* document. This document begins: "Confronted with the grave crises precipitated by racial discord within our state in recent months, and the genuine dilemma facing persons of Christian conscience, we are compelled to voice publicly our convictions." The *Born of Conviction* document goes on to affirm the 1960 Social Creed that God is God of all people and races, that Jesus Christ is God's Son, that all people are brothers and sisters, and that we are all people of infinite worth as a children of God. Though this statement reveals what is obvious to us now, back then it was highly controversial because it pointedly challenged racial discrimination and segregation.

Upon its publishing in newspapers, the lives of the 28 signers were forever changed. Some pastors received death threats, or had crosses burned on parsonage lawns. Others were told that their churches would not welcome them back. Within a year, many of those ministers and their families moved to other conferences due to the extraordinary backlash of signing this document. My family also moved away and found a new home in Claremont, California. It was not until the General Conference in 2000 that the United Methodist Church held a service of repentance to confess the sin of racism within the denomination.

The United Methodist Church created a new space for welcome and an opportunity for joy to grow out of re-formed relationships when it repented of the sin of racial discrimination. We are once again at a pivotal moment in our Church's history, struggling over the question of exclusion and inclusion. The coming Special Session is a result of decades of unresolved conflict within the walls of our "home" of the United Methodist Church. We are likely to see new disputes arise as a result of the decisions made at the Special Session. How do we create welcoming spaces for people despite disagreements over our way forward?

When Zephaniah describes the radical hospitality in "bringing one home," I think about the welcome we provide when we make a space for everyone to belong. During this Advent season, we will create opportunities for special gatherings and dinners by bringing different people into the spaces we call "home." These people may not be our family, may not look like us, worship like us or even believe all the things we believe. Yet, we extend the invitations because we follow the example of Christ, who created a new welcome for all of humanity by boldly entering into our conversations and spaces. Christ came without requirement that his conversation partners thought like him. Christ came, knowing that the

spaces he entered did not always understand him. He came anyway and transformed everyone he encountered. In the midst of welcome and coming home, we encounter joy in our transformed relationships.

It will be my joy to welcome my family, including my youngest daughter Charlotte back home during Advent. She was baptized at Park Slope UMC, crawled under the pews, and spent many hours in Sunday School and Youth Group learning about God, Jesus, and Methodism. She regularly comes home from Los Angeles for the holidays, attending Christmas Eve service and feels the JOY of being around the church community who loves and accepts her, no matter who she loves. Charlotte has only known the Church to be accepting, loving and open to all people. As we make our way forward, I invite you to follow paths of listening to our history of inclusion - paths that take each and every one of us home to a welcoming community. What a joy to be gathered by God and brought home to spaces of welcome and praise!

Prayer for Today

O God of Joy and Wonder, we thank you for your generous welcome to all of us. You show us grace and mercy when we stumble. Thank you for extending your radical hospitality to all your children over and over again! We delight in the joy you share with us through your new beginnings and expanding possibilities before us. Forgive us when we exclude your beloved children from your table. Teach us to welcome everyone, even the people we have not yet learned to love -- continue to restore the fortune so often right in front of our eyes! We lift our hands in praise, while our hearts dance with JOY!

We lift our hands in praise and dancing because you have given us the gift of JOY! In Jesus' name we pray, Amen!

Questions for Reflection

How can you create gracious spaces of welcome for people who are different from you in your home? In your church? In your community?

What are the ways you can discover joy in your relationships with people who are different from you?

To read more about the "Born of Conviction" document, visit: and <https://www.seedbed.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/BoC-text2.pdf> and <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/mississippi-pastors-paid-price-for-segregation-challenge>

Peace On Our Way Forward

Rev. Marcia White-Smith and Rev. Sabrina Johnson Chandler

*For the mountains may depart and the hills be moved,
But my steadfast love shall not depart from you,
And my covenant of peace shall not be removed,
Says the Lord, who has compassion on you.
Isaiah 54:10*

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:4-7

It seems timely, maybe even fortunate, that before we arrive at the date of the Special Session of the General Conference in February 2019, we must travel through the season of Advent. Our Christian tradition is to hold Advent as a season of anticipation and preparation. It references a people who live, faces uplifted, waiting for God to move and act in our midst in powerful ways.

We don't quite know when or how God will act; and so, we wait in faith. We don't quite know how our anxiety, worry or fear will be relieved; and so we wait in faith. We don't quite know how the future will take shape; and so we wait in faith! What we do know, is that... God is. We can insert any number of descriptors after that verb. God is with us. God is wise. God is omnipotent. God is omniscient. God is working. God is listening. God is responsive. God is love.

The prophet Isaiah says that even though an earthquake moves mountains and catastrophes completely change the landscape around us, God will keep the covenant of Peace with us. God's steadfast love will not be removed from us. What does this mean? This means that God's covenant of peace, a peace that passes all understanding, will protect our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7). We can say this upcoming Special Session may change the very landscape of our Church in front of our eyes, and this could cause us great fear and trembling. Yet! God is Steadfast Love. God is a Covenant of Peace.

God's covenant of peace with us enables us to draw from a deep well-spring of joy in the midst of chaos. It gives us license to treat each other kindly when conflicts and disagreements rise. It is a continual reminder that the Lord is 'Immanuel'; near and with us. It encourages us to take any worry that we have to God. It births an unexplainable peace in us that we can use to point people to the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ!

In this season of Advent, even as we wrestle with difficult issues that will impact the life of the United Methodist Church, hold on to your peace. Remember your covenant with God.

Peace will give you the faith and strength to wait, with your face uplifted, for God to move and act in powerful ways. May God grant us all a peace that surpasses every understanding.

Prayer for Today

Almighty, gracious and redeeming God, we lift up praises to you on high. You have shown compassion to us throughout the ages, in spite of our choices which at times have lead us away from loving you and each other. We thank you that your unfailing love for us remains unshaken and, that in the words of the prophet Isaiah, your covenant of peace will not be removed. In the days ahead as we expectantly await the birth of the baby Jesus, help us to seek his example as we tread uncharted waters. Loving Creator, we ask that you prepare a way forward for your Church which reflects compassion and embraces the peace that surpasses all understanding. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

How will you seek God's peace whatever the future might bring?

How will you encourage others to draw on God's peace as we approach uncharted waters?

Expecting the Unexpected On Our Way Forward

Rev. Jordan Scruggs

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined...For a child has been born to us, a son is given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Isaiah 9:2; 6*

This past spring, our daughter Sage arrived six weeks ahead of her due date. She looked enormous next to the other Neonatal ICU patients, and at six pounds she outweighed all of them. Even so, when I held Sage for the first time, I could sense the delicate nature of her comparably sturdy frame, and her feeding tube and the warmer they placed her in were reminders of her fragility.

It is an awe-inspiring, terrifying thing to be in an intensive care unit for premature babies. The atmosphere of the NICU is permeated both with anxiety and hope as nurses scurry from station to station keeping watch over each waxing wisp of human life. Every moment is precarious and precious. Surrounded by the perpetual whirring of life-saving machines, their bodies glowing under the soft lighting of the incubators, babies flex their tiny fingers and toes sporadically in the deep sleep of neonatal intensity. The reds and purples of veins leap from beneath translucent skin and heartbeats shake entire bodies, eyelids flutter and arms tuck into sides like tiny bird wings. Periodically, petite cries punctuate the beeps and clicks of monitoring equipment – a dialogue between life and its uncertainties.

In the shadow of this experience I pause, seven months later, to consider anew the miracle of the Incarnation: that series of moments in our history when God said yes, again and again, to the hazards of the human experience, not only the risks of suffering and betrayal, but yes to the chaos of utter dependence on another being, yes to the primal whimper and the root for a soothing breast. Before Jesus fed 5,000 and calmed storms with a few simple words, he was a tiny, tenuous body: the Author of our Existence, Ground of our Being, encased in our feeble flesh.

This is the God who breaks into our world not only at Advent, but into our everyday lives, both with the heavy, surrendered sigh of a sleeping infant as well as within the turmoil of the conflicts we have with one another. In the tension and stress of the immediate clash in the United Methodist Church, it is easy to forget that we serve a gracious God who specializes in the unexpected, in possibilities that are both unimaginable and, dare I say, driven by profound love to the point of foolishness.

It is easy to forget that the future, while shaped by the things that we do, isn't entirely up to us, and that a God who desperately loves us also longs to break into our troubled world with the same urgency and fervor as the Incarnation. As we approach this Special Session of General Conference, let us approach it with the Advent spirit, with the expectation that God is going to show up in a way we are least likely to expect. Let us prepare to be

challenged by God, to be changed by God for the sake of righteousness and right relationship. Let us strive to be truth-tellers who trust in the mystery of the ultimate Truth, with humility, awe, and graciousness with one another.

Prayer for Today

Holy Creator, abide with us. Enable us to regard one another with the same love that inspired your self-emptying and your risk-taking when you came to us as an infant. Help us to come to you as children in the same way you came to us as a child. Inspire us to trust in you the way that you trusted us! Give us the grace to rest quietly in your tender and loving care for each of us. Carry us through this Advent, lulled by the steady and consistent movement of your Spirit into a space yet indeterminate but already filled with your presence.

In the name of Jesus, the one who guides all, welcomes all, loves all, abides within all. Amen.

Questions for Reflection

When did you last practice “expecting the unexpected”? What did you do to prepare yourself to be challenged and surprised by God?

How can you be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit again? Write your responses down so you can add to this list for future reference, when you may need it again.

What can you do to invite others to join you in “expecting the unexpected” from God?

Epiphany On Our Way Forward

Rev. Doris K. Dalton

*When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.
Matthew 2:9-12*

At every end, there is a new beginning. The Advent road ends at Epiphany, the moment the wise men are changed forever after they encounter an extraordinary revelation. This is the culmination of a long journey, traveling across miles and months to find the new leader of God's people. These wise men were scholars and experts in their field, guided by their combined knowledge, studies and logical conclusions. When they thought they had reached the end of their journey, they acted on their logical conclusions by arriving at the palace of the King, with their extravagant gifts, assumptions and beliefs at the ready. Everyone was surprised to discover that King Herod was not the answer they were seeking.

Then, they checked their assumptions, beliefs and conclusions and discovered the star they had been following was still moving. The journey was not complete; this story had not ended. God was still moving.

Perhaps the Advent story has become too familiar for us that we have lost our sense of wonder at the wild twists and unexpected turns. We prefer to jump over the small details so we can rush to the grand scene of wise men bowing down before the baby Jesus in worship, with rich offerings of gold and spices at their feet. Yet, these small details are where we find God shifting the narrative of our expectations to reveal God's true purpose for us all. The palace is a reasonable place to find a king seated on a throne, but God is not constrained by human reasoning. God's creative possibility and power rewrites the ending of our stories, showing us our human calculations are not accurate predictors of God's direction for us.

Advent ends with a startling revelation, overturning everything the wise men thought they knew. They were so changed by what they encountered that they left by a road they had never taken before, signaling the beginning of a new journey with God. Our United Methodist story will not end when the Special Session closes on February 26, 2019. We will be forever changed after wise scholars and church experts have their assumptions tested and overturned. The Holy Spirit will unravel careful calculations and perfected plans. We will encounter God's amazing revelation, reminding us that the people of God do not write the conclusions to God's stories. Followers of Christ, let us put down our pens and pick up our backpacks. We are called to a new beginning with God.

Prayer for Today

O God of our Beginnings and Endings, we are thankful that you are the Great Author and you hold our story from beginning to end. Your loving-kindness interrupts our narratives to show us a better way of being Christians. Teach us to trust you, we pray. Help us to be attentive to the movement of your Holy Spirit as we move into new beginnings. Give us courage as we travel on unfamiliar roads. Transform us again to let go of our old expectations so we can be the community you have called us to be. We pray all of these things in the powerful name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

Questions for Reflection

Do you remember a time when you encountered God in a life-changing way? How did it alter your relationships?

Do you recall a time when you realized your assumptions were inaccurate, and it caused you to change the way you see the situation or people differently? What happened?

This Advent story reminds us that we are not always right about what God is doing or where God is leading us. We have the opportunity to learn to see others as God sees them. What can you do to check your assumptions about people in your community or congregation? How can your findings help you see others as God sees them? Will this change the way you relate to them?

About the Writers

Hope On Our Way Forward

Rev. Janet Cox is a provisional Deacon, currently serving as the Family Specialist at the Central Brooklyn Assertive Community Treatment Team. She also serves as the Youth Minister at St. Mark's UMC in Brooklyn.

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Joy! On Our Way Forward

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