

Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding! (ELW 246)

1

Hark! a thrilling voice is sounding!
"Christ is near," we hear it say.
"Cast away the works of darkness
all you children of the day!"

2

Wakened by the solemn warning, from earth's bondage let us rise; Christ, our sun, all sloth dispelling, shines upon the morning skies.

3

See the Lamb, so long expected, comes with pardon down from heav'n.
Let us haste, with tears of sorrow, one and all, to be forgiv'n;

4

So, when next he comes in glory and the world is wrapped in fear, he will shield us with his mercy and with words of love draw near.

5

Honor, glory, might, and blessing to the Father and the Son with the everliving Spirit while unending ages run!

Text: Latin Hymn, 1632; tr. Edward Caswall Music: William H. Monk; Public Domain

Sunday, November 30

"Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" (ELW 246)

We, the dearly beloved people of God, are desperate for a word of hope. Our current environment is filled with voices that sew doubt, hate, fear, and anger. Though we try to block out the negativity through prayers, breathing practices, nature, and community, it can feel almost impossible to avoid. We, as humans and as people of faith, desire a word of hope that is unconditional.

Our selected hymn for this Advent season begins with an attention grabber: HARK! We are called out of our stupor to listen—there is important news ahead. The invitation to listen continues with an intriguing, bold statement: The thrilling voice is sounding!

This Advent season, my prayer is that your reflection on the theme hymn and attendant readings quiets the voices of this world around us as we open our ears to the true voice. Only the voice of God's promises to you through Jesus Christ can quell fear, bring new life, and hold you steadfast.

God of the thrilling voice, quiet our minds and the outside noise this Advent season that our focus may be on you as we prepare for the promise of a Savior. Amen.

Monday, December 1

Isaiah 11:1-10

Isaiah paints a beautiful picture as he describes the stump of Jesse, from which a new root will sprout. The imagery invites us to imagine this fresh life pushing its way through the fertile soil, drawing strength from the earth as it grows. Isaiah begins this chapter with a promise, but this is only the beginning of the story. With each word, he creates a vivid image that offers hope and peace.

Through powerful metaphors, Isaiah promises relief from the burdens of injustice, war, division, abandonment, and isolation. Are you carrying any of these emotional weights? Let the words of Isaiah wash over you, for in them lies the promise of the Peacemaker—the one who brings healing and restoration.

God of creation—you have given us the promise of peace. We ask for peace in our hearts, in our neighborhoods, in our cities, country, and world. Only you have the peace that passes all understanding. Amen.

Tuesday, December 2

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Many commentaries on Psalm 72 highlight that this prayer for King Solomon serves as a model for how we should pray for our leaders. While the prayer might seem overly idealistic in its zealous hope for a king, it serves as a powerful reminder that all leaders need our prayers.

It can be challenging to pray for those in leadership, especially when we disagree with their ideology or leadership style. Perhaps a leader has made decisions that felt personal, unfair, or unwarranted. However, the psalmist reminds us that, at their best, a leader's deeds should reflect righteousness, justice, peace, and freedom for the oppressed.

During our Advent journey, let us remember the leaders in our lives and pray for them—that they would lead with justice, righteousness, and peace.

God of our leaders—we pray for those in leadership. We pray that they will lead with justice, righteousness, and peace in their hearts. Amen.

Wednesday, December 3

Romans 15:4-13

In Romans 15, Paul is guiding us on our Advent journey. He reminds us of Isaiah's promise we encountered earlier this week—that a shoot will spring up from the stump of Jesse. Paul points to Jesus and his earthly ministry as the fulfillment of that ancient prophecy. But Paul also makes a crucial point: This message is not just for the Jews; it is for the Gentiles as well. Christ is for everyone.

In a world often divided by labels and categories, it can be tempting to create our own definitions of who is "right" and who is "wrong." But the gospel message shatters these divisions—the good news is for all people.

As we prepare to celebrate again the incarnation of the gospel this Advent season, let us remember that the heart of the gospel is about who is *included*, not about who is *excluded*.

God of inclusion, you have created us to have our own minds and opinions. Yet sometimes we want to use those thoughts to exclude other children of God. Grant us patience and understanding that we may see you in one another. Amen.

Thursday, December 4

Matthew 3:1-12

Advent readings often use vivid language to draw us into rich imagery and spectacle. From the root of Jesse to the promises of a coming Savior, the language invites us to visualize God's unfolding plan. And now, we encounter John the Baptist in the wilderness—eating locusts, wild honey, dressed in camel's hair, and wearing a leather belt. Why does Matthew include these striking details about John?

The point is not so much about what he wears or how he looks; it's about the message he proclaims. God doesn't always speak in ways we expect. Often, God's Word comes through the unexpected—like a locust-eating man from the wilderness. Matthew is urging us to notice the details, but not to get distracted by them. The call is simple yet powerful: Repent and prepare.

We live in a world full of distractions, where messages are often designed to seduce and divert our attention. Advent is a time to quiet those distractions and listen closely for the pure voice of God—the voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord."

God of preparation—quiet our mind this Advent season that we may hear your call from unexpected places. Amen.

Friday, December 5

Matthew 3:1–12

Whether we like to admit it or not, we are all people who long to belong. God created us for community, and throughout the Bible, we see stories of God's people being drawn together or exiled from community. In today's reading from Matthew, we see people from all over Judea, Jerusalem, and the Jordan River gathering to hear John the Baptist and receive baptism. Even the religious leaders—the Pharisees and Sadducees—were curious enough to witness what was happening at the river.

In our own faith tradition, Baptism and Holy Communion serve as two powerful ways we come together as a community of believers. Through the water of baptism, and through the bread and wine of communion, we are freely offered God's grace, acceptance, and the assurance that we belong.

In Christ's community, YOU are welcome and YOU belong.

God of water and of bread and wine—you have given us the gifts of baptism and holy communion to remind us that we belong. We are part of the community of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Saturday, December 6

"Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" (ELW 246, Verse 1)

In the readings leading up to the Second Sunday of Advent, we begin our church calendar year with a reminder of who we are and where we come from. A root from the stump of Jesse, a psalmist who offers a prayer for its leader, a voice crying out from the wilderness, Paul's message of salvation for Jews and Gentiles; all is part of the foundation on which we build our Advent journey while we follow and listen for a thrilling new voice.

Many of you read these devotions first thing in the morning to help center your day. Maybe the voices around you are still quiet in the still of the morning, but as the day continues, we will all be filled with commentaries, opinions, and noise. When that happens, let us remember the one true voice that we follow that will cast away the works of darkness and give us grace and strength through our Advent journey.

God of quiet—give us the courage to step into this day with peace and patience that we may be focused on your one true voice amidst all of the distractions of life. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Sunday, December 7

"Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" (ELW 246, Verse 2)

The dreaded alarm. Even for morning people, there are times when we need to set an alarm to interrupt what we were doing and signal the start of something new. On Monday mornings, mine goes off at 4:30 a.m. I need to be at my local Y by 5:00 a.m. to instruct an early morning fitness class. And even though this has been my routine for over a decade, that 4:30 alarm still feels like a jarring sound—a "solemn warning," as the hymnist puts it—that it's time to rise. There are people depending on me to show up. As unpleasant as alarms can be, they serve a purpose: They get our attention.

The Advent season works in much the same way. It invites us to stop, to pay attention, and to wake up to what God is doing around us. Where might God be calling you to shift your focus? To begin something new? Take time today to pause and listen. Let God's Spirit awaken you from your slumber, for something new is breaking into the world—shining, even now, upon the morning skies.

God of morning—we ask that you remind us to pay attention today. Help us to see where you are active in our lives and what we must awaken from. Amen.

Monday, December 8

Isaiah 35:1-10

As the lectionary readings for the third week of Advent begin, we return to the prophet Isaiah, who offers poetic and hopeful words to a weary and exiled people. Isaiah speaks of a future shaped by restoration—where even the barren desert bursts into life. He uses the imagery of creation to proclaim the hopeful promise of the coming Messiah.

Whether in a desert climate or in colder regions, parched or frozen, Isaiah reminds us of God's already unfolding work of renewal, beauty, and peace: "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God." (Isaiah 35:4)

Take time today to notice the quiet signs of God's presence. Whether in nature, in others, or within your own heart, these glimpses remind us: God is still at work, restoring, renewing, and redeeming all things—even in the wilderness.

God of snow and rain, you give us seasons and weather that are reminders of your work in this world. Show us, today, your work in our lives through your creation. Amen.

Tuesday, December 9

Psalm 146:5-10

Help and hope are a major theme of this psalm, and of the Advent season. Happy are those whose help and hope is in God. We often invoke "hope" without having much sense of what it means beyond wishful thinking or optimism. But the psalmist roots this hope in the cosmic creation bespeaking the Divine's presence above, around, and beneath us. Creation is the visual song of God's help and hope, turning us outward in wonder toward the web of life that enfolds us.

But the psalmist also turns our attention to another source of hope and evidence of God's help: justice for the oppressed, food for the hungry, setting prisoners free, healing of bodies, watching over strangers, upholding orphan and widow. The many ways God brings these things about, through the community of faith called to love of God and neighbor, give rootedness and context to the happiness of those whose help is the creating God and whose hope is in the redeeming love of the Divine.

Holy One, whose goodness all creation praises and whose love sustains and upholds us in our distress, be now for us, as you were for our ancestors, our help and our hope as we move through the shadows of this season toward the light that is beginning to dawn. Amen.

Wednesday, December 10

James 5:7-10

Patience is one of the virtues cultivated by the Advent season. In this text from the letter of James, hearers are called toward patience in the eschatological expectation of the coming of the Lord. Like farmers wait for crops or for rain, we too exert patience.

But patience is not the same thing as complacency or apathy or sitting idly by waiting for something to happen. After all, the farmer that roots the metaphor in this passage has certainly done his work! But the rain and the resulting crop yield is not entirely up to him. As biblical scholar Elsa Támez notes, "patience," for James, is not passive or submissive because nothing can be done. It is, instead, a "militant patience" that is an active, working patience—like that of a farmer, or those who strive for justice (another concern of James), or "the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord."

God of the prophets, and God of the good earth from which the crops spring and the sky from which the rain falls, root us in patience. May we work when we need to work, find rest when we need to rest, and wait with expectation for that which only you can bring about. Amen.

Thursday, December 11

Matthew 11:2-11

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" The quintessential question of Advent. And it is good for us to see that the answer was not clear, even for Jesus' cousin John and his disciples. Are you the one? Really?

And the reply from Jesus harkens back to the psalm from earlier in the week. "Go and tell John what you hear and see": Those needing healing are healed, the dead are raised to new life, the poor experience good news. These are the signs that the one who is to come is now here—for John, for his disciples, and for us.

What signs do you see that the one who is to come has now come into our lives, the lives of our congregations, the lives of our community? Where is the Divine's incarnate presence shaping life anew?

God who has come among us, who continues to dwell among us, and who is to come among us again, be palpable to us in the renewed life of those who are living at the edge, those who wait for Good News, with militant patience, for help and for hope. Amen.

Friday, December 12

Matthew 11:2-11

John the Baptist is one of the most enigmatic figures in the gospels, and someone few of us likely endeavor to emulate. Not one dressed in soft robes or living in royal places. A prophet, and *even more than a prophet*. A forerunner, a messenger, a preparer of the way.

Those who wear soft robes are juxtaposed to genuine prophets in this passage. The one "among whom those born of women no one has arisen greater" is one crying out in *wilderness* places, where risk and revelation meet, diverting attention away from himself and toward one who is coming. One whose message is always: Expect something coming, wait with anticipation, repent and ready your hearts ... the one who is coming is almost here!

And no one is greater than John the Baptist! Well, except *the least* in the kingdom of heaven.

God, we give thanks for expectations turned upside down by the rule and reign of grace. May we, too, have our expectations turned upside down, as we wait for the coming of one for whom John prepared the way. Help us prepare the way for him to enter our hearts and lives anew this season, and always. Amen.

Saturday, December 13

"Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" (ELW 246, Verse 3)

"See the Lamb, so long expected ... " This verse of "Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" begins with a resplendent sight come "down from heav'n," but ends with "tears of sorrow, one and all." It's an image of repentance, deeply rooted in the liturgical lexicon of the Advent season. The Lamb coming down from heaven, met by the tearful haste of one and all to be forgiven.

In Martin Luther's 1522 sermon for the first Sunday in Advent, he said, "He comes, comes unto you. Yea, verily, you go not to Him, neither do you fetch Him. He is too high for you, and too far away." The coming of Advent is both harrowing and heartening. Advent's tears are both sorrowful and joyful.

Luther continues, "Therefore learn here from the Gospel what happens when God begins to build us into the likeness of Him, and what is the beginning of saintliness. There is no other beginning than that your king comes unto you, and begins the work in you."

God give us all the life you have to give. Perfect your perfect love in us. Amen.

Sunday, December 14

"Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" (ELW 246, Verse 4)

Eschatological expectation arises again in verse four of "Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" "When next he comes in glory and the world is wrapped in fear." There's hardly a more apt description of our world's state at this moment: wrapped in fear. Wars and famines and disasters and political turmoil roil our planetary life.

This hymn is a Latin hymn, likely of the fifth century. But it was translated into English by Edward Caswall in 1849. Caswall's England and Ireland were also experiencing war, famine, and a horrid cholera pandemic during the era of this hymn's translation. "A thrilling voice" calling was likely hard to hear then, as it is now.

When you sing this hymn in the Advent season this year, know that you are joining your voices with a millennia-and-a-half of saints who, alongside you as a great cloud of witnesses, still sing our collective prayer to the one who "with words of love draw(s) near."

God of mercy and love, be with us now, even when we are wrapped with the world in fear. We long, with the saints from age to age, for your shield of mercy to surround us. Amen.

Monday, December 15

Isaiah 7:10-16

"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel" (God is with us). This is the message of the prophet Isaiah to a king and a people living in fear. It's an odd sign, ambiguous and uncertain in its meaning. Is "God with us" promising or menacing, a comfort to us, or the exposure of our shortcomings?

This text becomes a quintessential Advent text when the word "young woman" in Hebrew becomes "virgin" in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint. Still an ambiguous and uncertain sign. How is it that God will come to dwell among us? As a baby?

King Ahaz was offered a sign of God's promise and refused it. We are offered a sign of God's promise in the Advent season, ambiguous and uncertain as it is. How will we respond to the word of Immanuel coming into the world born to a young woman?

Prepare our hearts, O God, that we might receive the signs of your loving presence, and in them rejoice. Amen.

Tuesday, December 16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

This is the prayer of a people who believe God is angry. "You have fed them with the bread of tears and given them tears to drink in full measure." Restore us, O God of hosts!

We often have difficulty with psalms that express dark moods—anger, lament, frustration, being at the end of one's rope. And even more so when those psalms direct these expressions toward God. There's something raw and real about these prayers that strikes us as too insightful about those whose prayers may be similarly shaped today.

There's no repentance for wrongdoing in this psalm. Just frustration and confusion over God's turning away when the people are in greatest need. This is not suffering as punishment for any sin, just suffering that has no answer. Suffering in need of salvation.

The prayer of the psalmist, and the prayer uttered at Advent when we, too, may feel at the end of our rope, becomes simply: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." Amen.

Wednesday, December 17

Romans 1:1-7

This passage is a succinct summation of the gospel, which roots Paul's call as an apostle in the prophetic enunciations and the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is also an introduction of Paul to God's beloved in Rome.

In an individualistic culture like that of the U.S., it may seem startling to see one introduce oneself not with descriptions of one's own characteristics and interests and identities, but with an introduction rooted in a lineage. "Set apart for the gospel ... promised beforehand through his prophets ... concerning his Son, who was descended from David ... with power according to the spirit ..."

While this is Paul's apostolic identity, it is also ours. Rooting the very essence of who we are in a baptismal identity that intends to "bring about the obedience of faith" for those who follow Jesus "through whom we have received grace." And it is a summons to discipleship "including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ ... who are called to be saints."

You have called us, O God, to be your servants and saints, obedient in faith, the recipients of grace.

Strengthen us, now, with power according to the Spirit, that we may walk in the way of discipleship following Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Thursday, December 18

Matthew 1:18-25

This is a story of naming and reframing. Today, let's talk about the reframing. Tomorrow we'll explore the naming.

There is one way to frame this story. It is the way Joseph framed it. He knew that the child in Mary's womb was not his. It is a story of disgrace. Joseph was a good guy, he didn't want Mary to suffer public shame, so he planned to dismiss her quietly. He, in his context, was trying to do the right thing.

Then Gabriel shows up and reframes it for Joseph. What appears to be shameful on the surface is actually a holy disruption of God bringing the salvation of the world.

Think about that. What stories need reframing in your life today? How often does God work in the least likely ways to bring us salvation from our distorted frames?

Oh God, give us eyes to see things the way you do. May we see your salvation, even in the darkest places. Amen.

Friday, December 19

Matthew 1:18-25

Yesterday we said this was a story of reframing. Today we will see how this is a story of naming, of a thrilling voice calling.

Gabriel told Joseph to name the child *Jesus*. This is the Greek version of the Hebrew name *Joshua*. It means *Jehovah is salvation*. The child is not a child of shame, but a child of salvation.

Then Matthew interprets this naming event by associating it with another naming story. When the prophet Isaiah was speaking truth to King Ahaz in Isaiah, God offered a sign. He said, "The young woman ... shall bear a son ... and name him Immanuel." (Isaiah 7:14) This name means God is with us.

Here is the scene. Two young Jewish people are in a precarious situation. Their reputations are in jeopardy with a scandalous pregnancy. Their country is in jeopardy as it suffers the oppression of an empire. Honestly, I would name that *despair*. But now there is another name to call out: *Jehovah is salvation*. God is with us.

Oh God who is with us in our darkest hour, may we feel your presence today. Immanuel, Immanuel, Amen.

Saturday, December 20

"Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" (ELW 246, Verse 4)

The second line of verse four says, "When the world is wrapped in fear." That's a good description for billions of people in our world today.

Here is the mystery and the gift of Advent. It is always based in a hope that calls from the future. The Hebrew prophets moaned in the fear of Ancient Empires crushing their people. They called out for the dawn of a Messiah.

Christians claim to follow that Messiah. Jesus of Nazareth is Jehovah is Salvation and God with Us. And still, our world is shrouded in the darkness and suffering of oppression and fear. And yet, the Advent voice still calls out. The promise of God calls from the future. The coming of Jesus is the already-and-not-yet reality of God's unfolding promise. In the grace of God through Jesus, we can be wrapped in God's mercy and drawn near in love, now and forever.

Oh God, draw us near to your love. Wrap us in the shield of your mercy. Amen.

Sunday, December 21

"Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" (ELW 246, Verse 5)

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, there is no greater thrilling voice than the one that sings praise to God. Our hymn ends with the crescendo of the season. We give praise to the Creator of all things.

Many scholars have noted a theme in scripture: We become the God we worship. Humans craft gods out of the materials of the earth (wood, stone, metal), attach our own lusts onto them (money, power, sex), and then worship them. This creates a destructive feedback loop in which the worship of our gods is actually the worship of the darker parts of ourselves. So, we continually become the worst image of ourselves in a downward spiral.

The God of the Bible is not an object or another thing in the universe. God is the relationality of Creator–Redeemer–Sustainer, Lover–Beloved–Love, Father–Son–Spirit, in infinite, interdependent love. This is the ground from which all life springs forth. When we worship The Triune God, we become interdependent love.

Oh God, Father, Son and Spirit, give us the grace to praise you. Transform us into the nature of your self-giving, interdependent love. Amen.

Monday, December 22

Isaiah 9:2-7

Isaiah is writing to people who are suffering greatly. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah are at war. The Empire of Assyria is invading. Widows, orphans, the poor—everyone is being slaughtered. The people don't know what to do.

Notice how God uses children to speak to the situation. Isaiah tells King Ahaz, in Isaiah 8:16–22, "I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts." Then he warns the king not to listen to those who "consult the ghosts or the dead gods of Canaan."

The vision of hope for the people of Judah was that "a child has been born for us, a son given to us." The promises of God call to us from the future, embodied in the children.

O God with us, may we lift our eyes from the despair of death around us. Give us the eyes of children and trust your promises with hope. Amen.

Tuesday, December 23

Psalm 96

Sing to the Lord a new song. This psalm is the first major chord in a symphony that has trembled in the dark tones of a minor key throughout Advent. The people of Judah wallowed in the darkness of Isaiah's world. They lived in the pain of invasion and oppression.

Our readings this week have allowed us to see the light of hope beginning to glow along the rim of the horizon. Words of a child born among us have emerged. Hope peeks over the edge.

Now, this psalm welcomes the dawn. There is a new day. The Lord reminds all creation that there is hope. The gods of the people are idols. The darkness of our pettiness, greed, and war last only for a moment.

The Messiah is coming. He will judge the people with equity. He will judge the world with righteousness. Come, Jehovah-is-salvation. Come, God-is-with-us.

We give you thanks, O Lord, for your faithfulness. We give you thanks for your everlasting and steadfast love. Amen.

Wednesday, December 24 Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

We jump from Matthew's telling of the story to Luke's. It retraces the path of darkness to light that we have traveled over the past few days.

It is important to remember that Mary and Joseph were displaced people. The Roman Empire occupied their land and brutally forced them to leave their home, travel over 90 miles, and find shelter in an overcrowded foreign town. Mary and Joseph were political refugees. They had nowhere to stay.

They were living in the darkness of suffering that comes from the evil we create when greed, power, and violence are the gods we serve. God became flesh among those who suffer at the hands of oppression.

The dawn breaks over the horizon. The child is born. Jehovah is salvation. And the angels told the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace ..."

Oh Lord, glory to you. Thank you for becoming one of us. May we live in the light of the hope of your salvation. Amen.

Thursday, December 25 Christmas Day

"Hark! A Thrilling Voice Is Sounding!" (ELW 246)

Imagine the baby Jesus laying in his mother's arms. The long night of labor is over. The screams, the blood and water, the sweat and swearing, they are now a shadowy memory. The blessedness of this child is the bright morning dawn that puts those painful events into perspective.

For unto us a child is born.

This is an image of peace. There is a spiritual bond exchanged between the eyes of mother and child. The mirror neurons are firing and the spiritual/mental/physical connection is forming. And yet, this is just the beginning. This precious child will grow up in a world that will be filled with those who hate him and love him. The Roman oppressors are still there. The greedy, powerful, and violent are still clinging to control.

So, we too, his followers, gaze into God's eyes, filled with assurance of being loved, and we move into the hopeful growing of the year ahead.

Oh God, our blessed parent, giver of life, fill us with your love, hope, and courage. Hark! We hear the thrilling voice calling us into the new day. Amen.

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