

Grace to you and peace from God, our Creator, and from our Savior, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.

Like a lot of people, many of my early childhood memories are kind of fuzzy. But one of the things I remember from this time of year was the Advent calendar we had. We used the same one for many years. It didn't have chocolate in it.

But it did have that old-school, superfine glitter on it. And I think that's why I remember it. Each time we opened one of the little doors, a little bit of that glitter would stick and stay on mine and my sisters' hands – because that's what glitter does.

And behind each of those little doors were a few words and the citation of a Bible verse taking us through the story up to Jesus' birth. Its simplicity is in sharp contrast to many of the Advent calendars that are sold today.

They contain everything from cosmetics to jam to wine to you-name-it – including chocolate of varying qualities. <sup>1</sup>Pastor Winn Collier, an Episcopal priest, even describes some of them as “bougie.”

But while the fancier Advent calendars are in good fun, they often gloss over the intentionality of this season to recognize the weariness in our world and the longstanding need for hope.

Neither the weariness nor the need for hope are new. They have been experienced by people for centuries, if not millennia. For God's people, they are deeply connected with the promise of the Messiah – the One promised to fulfill all hope.

And as we think about that, together with these weeks leading up to the celebration of Jesus' birth, we remember that Advent is about God. God is the one who acts. God is the one who sends Jesus, the Savior. Because God loves us, and God is with us always.

It was that assurance about God's love and presence, God's faithfulness, that Ezekiel's audience was desperate to hold onto.

As we've been talking about over the last few weeks, the Judeans' exile to Babylon was a defining moment for them. After ignoring the prophets' pleas to turn back toward God, they were forced to move after Babylon invaded.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://winncollier.substack.com/p/advent-for-the-troubled-soul>

But it wasn't only an invasion. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple – the place where God was believed to live. When all was said and done, the monarchy that held the promise of the line of David was no more. The Judeans' dreams for autonomy, liberation, and prosperity were gone.

The places and people that had been their cultural and religious anchors no longer existed. They didn't all live together in the same place anymore. They believed that their God had been defeated. They could not envision a future where they'd still be God's people.

It was as bad for them as it could get. And Ezekiel was part of all this. He was in exile, too. And because he was in this with them, Ezekiel knew the pain of the Judeans. He had experienced it.

<sup>2</sup>The dry bones he stood among in that valley embodied the shattered identity of his people. And on the surface, the question, "Can these bones live?" seems to only be about whether the God of Israel can raise the dead. But the deeper question is, "Can hope take root and bloom again in the aftermath of such violence and loss?"

<sup>3</sup>Ezekiel believes the answer is "yes." But the hope he offers the Judeans doesn't ignore their pain or loss. It stares it right in the face and acknowledges its truth. And the words he speaks are from Yahweh, the God who created all life. Words of assurance that God had not been conquered and was still there with them.

<sup>4</sup>This promise reminded the Judeans of God's own initiative in Genesis – making humans from dust and breathing into them the breath of life. And God taking the initiative again delivering the Hebrew slaves from Egypt.

In the promise we hear this morning, Ezekiel tells the Judeans that God will take the initiative yet again: God's Spirit, the breath of life, will bring new life to a people that were as dead as bones. That promise, that hope, sustained the Judeans in a way that nothing else would because it came from the God that brings life even out of death.

Too often, when we think of hope, we think more in terms of optimism – like always being happy, always saying, "Things are fine" even when they're not. Like bougie Advent calendars that gloss over the weariness and deep need for hope in our world.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/ezekiel-valley-of-dry-bones/commentary-on-ezekiel-371-14-12>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-in-lent/commentary-on-ezekiel-371-14-5>

<sup>5</sup>Author Kate Bowler describes optimism as a fine dinner guest – easy to sit beside and always sure dessert is coming. Until the conversation gets heavy, and then it slips quietly out the door without saying “good-bye.”

But hope, she reminds us, sticks around. It says, “Things are hard. But God is here.” It’s forged in the gap between what is and what will be.

It reminds us that Advent does not invite us to be optimists. Advent invites us to be hopers. Not because everything is fine, but because God is faithful.

<sup>6,7</sup>Two years ago, in solidarity with the suffering in Gaza due to the war between Israel and Palestine, the main churches in Jordan, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem agreed to cancel all public Christmas celebrations that year.

People celebrated in their homes and religious services were held in individual churches. But all public celebrations, markets, and parades were called off. None happened last year, either.

But last night, local time, the Christmas tree in Manger Square was lit for the first time since that announcement. The decision to resume celebrations wasn’t without controversy. The ceasefire in Gaza is shaky, and the suffering there continues. But Palestinians hope the festivities are a step toward a more peaceful future in the region.

One man commented that it isn’t like it was before the war, but it’s like life is coming back again.

When we think about God bringing life out of death, or God bringing new life, as Christians we usually leave that to the stuff of Easter. But it’s the stuff of the Incarnation, too. Jesus’ birth brought new life to the world in a way that nothing else has before or since.

The world wasn’t perfect when he was born, far from it. There was suffering and oppression then, too. But with Jesus’ birth came possibility, and promise, and hope.

With all of the places, and people, in our community and in our world where hope is needed, it’s easy to become overwhelmed by the need. So much so that we only pay

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<sup>5</sup> Section on optimism and hope taken from: <https://katebowler.substack.com/p/advent-day-3-hope-is-not-optimism>

<sup>6</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/bethlehem-christmas-west-bank-palestinians-jesus-b2c3824986e20be10020dfa1e1013bdb>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/christmas-lights-return-bethlehem-palestinians-look-hope-2025-12-06/>

attention to what's in front of us either in our daily lives, or the current headline in the news. Everything else just kind of blurs out.

We know that everything's not okay in our world. And admitting that is okay. Especially in this season.

Because God's faithfulness, and the hope it brings to our world, is transformational. It doesn't ask us to pretend. It sits with us in the not-okayness of things – in our weariness, our grief, our frustration, and our overwhelm. It's embodied by others in the moments we can't experience it for ourselves, breathing God's breath of life into us until new life comes.

As Christians, God's faithfulness reminds us that our hope is inextricably connected to Jesus – the One promised to fulfill all hope. The Messiah whose birth we are preparing to celebrate, and whose return we joyfully anticipate.

May the hope that has sustained God's people throughout the centuries – the hope made tangible in Jesus – sustain us in our lives in the days and weeks ahead.

Thanks be to God! Amen.