



## Advent Bingo

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sarah Hedgis  
The Second Sunday of Advent ~ December 6, 2020*

### Isaiah 40:1-11

“Console my people, give them comfort,”  
says your God.  
“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem’s heart,  
and tell it  
that its time of service is ended,  
that its iniquity is atoned for,  
that it has received from YHWH’s hand  
double punishment for all its sins.”

A voice cries out,  
“Clear a path through the wilderness for YHWH!  
Make a straight road through the desert for our God!  
Let every valley be filled in,  
every mountain and hill be laid low;  
let every cliff become a plain,  
and the ridges become a valley!  
Then the glory of YHWH will be revealed,  
and all humankind will see it.” The mouth of YHWH has spoken!

A voice commands, “Cry out!”  
and I answer, “What will I say?”  
—“All flesh is grass  
and its beauty is like the wildflowers: the grass withers  
and the flower wilts  
when the breath of YHWH blows on them.  
How the people are like grass!  
Grass withers, and flowers wilt,  
but the promise of our God will stand forever.”  
Go up on a high mountain,  
you who bring good news to Zion!  
Shout with a loud voice,  
you who bring good news to Jerusalem!  
Shout without fear,  
and say to the towns of Judah “Here is your God!”  
YHWH, O Sovereign One,  
you come with power,  
and rule with a strong arm!  
You bring your reward with you,  
and your reparation comes before you.  
Like a shepherd you feed your flock,  
gathering the lambs and holding them close,  
and leading mother ewes with gentleness.

### Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13

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| 1 | You have been gracious to your land, O God, *<br>you have restored the good fortune of Jacob. | and to those who turn their hearts to you.  |
| 2 | You have forgiven the iniquity of your people *<br>and blotted out all their sins.            | 9 Truly, your salvation is very near to those who fear you, *<br>that your glory may dwell in our land. |
| 8 | I will listen to what you are saying, *<br>for you are speaking peace to your faithful people | 10 Mercy and truth have met together; *<br>righteousness and peace have kissed each other.              |
|   |   | 11 Truth shall spring up from the earth, *  |

and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

12 You, O God, will indeed grant prosperity, \*  
and our land will yield its increase.

13 Righteousness shall go before you, \*  
and peace shall be a pathway for your feet.

### **2 Peter 3:8-15a**

This point must not be overlooked, dear friends: in the eyes of the Most High, one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. God does not delay in keeping the promise, as some mean “delay.” Rather, God shows you generous patience, desiring that no one perish but that all come to repentance. The day of our God will come like a thief, and on that day the heavens will vanish with a roar; the elements will catch fire and fall apart, and the earth and all its works will be destroyed in the flames.

Since everything is to be destroyed in this way, what holy and devoted lives you should lead! Look for the coming of the Day of God, and try to hasten it along. Because of it, the heavens will be destroyed in flames and the elements will melt away in a blaze. But what we await are new heavens and a new earth where, according to the promise, God’s justice will reside.

So beloved, while waiting for this, make every effort to be found at peace and without stain or defilement in God’s sight. Consider our God’s patience as your opportunity for salvation.

### **Mark 1:1-8**

HERE BEGINS THE GOSPEL OF JESUS CHRIST, the Son of God: as it was written in Isaiah the prophet: “I send my messenger before you to prepare your way, 3 a herald’s voice in the desert, crying, ‘Make ready the way of our God. Clear a straight path.’”

And so John the Baptizer appeared in the desert, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to John and were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. John was clothed in camel’s hair and wore a leather belt around his waist, and he ate nothing but grasshoppers and wild honey. In the course of his preaching, John said, “One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps. I have baptized you in water, but the One to come will baptize you in the Holy Spirit.”

mindful of your mercy—  
the promise you made to our ancestors—  
to Sarah and Abraham and their descendants forever.”

Good morning, God's people! It's the second Sunday of Advent, and I'm starting my sermon by preaching about bingo. Yes, bingo.

I'm a part of an online women clergy group where women ministers from across the country can post questions, articles, and other helpful resources. Around this time of year, someone in the group creates and posts Advent/Christmas bingo cards.

I have a copy of last year's card here, and I want to share just a couple of the squares one could mark to hit bingo in 2019. It imagines some of the less-than-ideal but very real scenarios clergy encounter during the holiday season as well as those moments that make it all worth it.

I5 = Unexpected breakdown of furnace and/or copier and/or computer

N4 = The Christmas pageant goes off the rails - in the best way

B1 = Balancing your holy awe with your fire safety concerns as entire congregation holds lit candles while singing Silent Night

This year, the card looks different. So different, maybe it was hard to hear those examples. So different, it's hard to want to create a bingo card for this year. No one has posted a 2020 version in my women clergy group. Bingo is this game of progress: with each letter-number combination, someone moves forward - we move closer to the end, the win. 2020 feels like anti-Bingo. But maybe that means it is the year for Advent.

Advent is a season of waiting, waiting for God to come into the world. Waiting for the birth of Jesus that declares God is with us, establishing God's justice and mercy and peace. We do not wait passively or distractedly; we wait actively and fiercely. John the Baptist captures this in one word: Prepare.

As we prepare, Advent challenges us to practice anticipation over instant gratification; hope and expectation in the face of resignation and cynicism. Advent beckons us to the wilderness, away from the familiar streets and structures of life, making some room for God to encounter us in a new way. It wades us into the waters of nuance and mystery, as we proclaim both that God is coming and also that God is already here, among us and at work in us.

The season of Advent, then, is a different way to live, which is right and good and joyful...except haven't we been living differently enough already? Waiting feels like a virtuous practice until we're waiting for a vaccine as people die. That waiting doesn't feel very holy. Or maybe you're wondering why you're trying to hold onto nuance when it is so absent from our politics. What do you do when you open yourself to hope, but instead encounter disappointment? How can we possibly clear a way forward, when the mountains of problems in our world are so high and the valleys of our suffering are so deep?

These are real and important questions. I think God longs for us to bring them into our Advent. In years past, many of us were able to separate this season from the harder things in our lives, to focus on the cheer. But Advent does not happen outside of our real lives. Like that highway in Isaiah, Advent seeks to carve itself right into them. For the first time for many of us, that is really good news.

This year in particular, I've put all of this pressure on Advent, to renew and fortify me. Which has also made me protective of Advent, worried that it's promise won't hold up or, more honestly, that I won't be able to find it amid the messiness of everything happening in our world. Can Advent really show us a better way to wait, to prepare, to live? Let's see together.

Our reading from Isaiah is one of the grandest declarations that God is coming. It's intentionally vague about who and how many voices are speaking. So, I've always imagined this flurry of excited voices crying out. God says, "Comfort, O comfort my people," and voice after voice cries out about God's imagination and healing and faithfulness and peace, and how these will be made known to all of God's people.

There is a part of this passage, right in the middle, that always stands out to me. Isaiah writes, "A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?'"

Now that is an Advent question: "What shall I cry?"

It's an Advent question because it marks a moment of real waiting - a pause - that requires our intention and contemplation and honesty. The space where we must bring our true selves in order to move forward, to say something real.

"All people are grass," the voice cries, "their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades..." But the voices press on, "The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever."

Maybe that does not sound like an Advent answer, but it is. It is a voice of promise, because it is rooted in truth: we do wither and fade. Not only in terms of mortality, but relationships can wither, our faith can fade. We are inconstant and unfaithful, not only to God but also to each other.

Claiming this truth makes way for hope: the hope that new life and healed relationships and renewed faith do not solely depend on us; the hope that God's word guides and strengthens us in ways not possible on our own.

Isaiah's question is the spirit of John the Baptist's call for repentance. Repent in its most basic form is to turn back, to turn back to God. But we must start with recognizing what we're turned towards -- the reality of where we are, so we can make the move back to where we long to be.

What we cry out must be rooted both in our hope in God's promise as well as the truth of our lives. To have one without the other is to deny them both, to make them both irrelevant, simple, cheap.

Advent calls out to us through the prophecy of Isaiah: "Comfort, O comfort my people;" the witness of John: "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit;" and the teachings of Peter: "With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day." These voices cry out the reminder that our longing for God knows no single season or country or generation. And that the only thing more constant than our longing for God is God's faithfulness to us.

Advent is an invitation to be /present to God's promise / by being present to our world / and present to ourselves. Really. In a way that is true and honest and messy. And our act of hope is that, when we do, God will be with us. That God's word will hold up in the things that mark our lives. And that God can transform them.

You know the middle of the bingo card is always a free space. On this 2019 Advent bingo card, the middle space says, "Glimpses of God's grace in it all." Amid the chaos and the worry and waiting, the center is God's promise. With our lives open and oriented towards that promise.

I've been working on my own Advent bingo card.

There's the John the Baptist square: where I'm trying to listen for the prophets in our own time who, like John, gathered all kinds of people together while always pointing to the One greater than himself. There are many of them.

There's the new heavens, new earth square: Where I'm marking how people are renewing the face of the earth, using withering grass to create new life.

There's the withering grass square: Where there is room to mourn and lament. To ensure I do not turn away my eyes or harden my heart to suffering, but even and especially there call on God's presence in it.

There's the mountain square: I marked it down after reading a post by the Reverend Jennifer Bailey, where she compares mountains to the systems of oppression in our world, seemingly too huge and immovable to make way for God. But then she offers this truth: mountains move. Usually very slowly or sometimes in moments of great stress or tension, but they do move. And this truth gives way to the hope that, this Advent, my prayer is to feel the mountains quake.

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I hope you will use this Advent season to ask, "What shall I cry?" To try out that 2020 Advent bingo card, marking down what you're seeing in the world and experiencing in your life, and then inviting God into the center of it all, so you might add your voice to the chorus of those calling out for God's promise: Come, Lord. And we will wait.

May it be so. Amen.