

Illuminating Advent

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Published especially for use in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), by Congregational Ministries Publishing, a ministry of the Presbyterian Mission Agency, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Louisville, Kentucky.

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Printed in the U.S.A.

Meet the Writer

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Introduction to *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding*

Reformed and Presbyterian Christians are people of faith who are seeking understanding. From the beginnings of our Reformed tradition, Presbyterians have realized God calls us to explore ways the Christian faith can be more fully known and expressed. This vision has driven concerns for the education of people of all ages. Presbyterians have been big on providing resources to help us delve more deeply into Christian faith and the theology that gives our living tradition its distinctive heritage.

This *Being Reformed* curriculum for adults is one expression of the desire to open up what it means to be Presbyterian Christians in the world today. Our purpose is to enhance, enrich, and expand our insights. We want Presbyterians to grow in understandings of elements that are foundational and significant for their faith. Encounters with theology, church, worship, spirituality/discipleship, and social righteousness will guide our ways.

These studies engage our whole selves. We will find our minds moved by new ideas, our emotions stirred with responses of gratitude, and calls for action that can lead us in different life directions. Heads, hearts, and hands will be drawn into the joys of discovering what new things God is calling us toward.

We invite you to join this journey of faith seeking understanding. Celebrate the blessings of our Reformed and Presbyterian tradition of faith. Be stimulated and challenged by fresh insights that will deepen your understandings. Find a stronger commitment to the God who has loved us in Jesus Christ.

To the Leader

The authors of *Being Reformed: Faith Seeking Understanding* emphasize essential Reformed theological principles that relate to our lives of faith. These sessions will help you lead a group into the theology and thoughts inspired by the challenging and interesting articles in the participant's book.

You might choose simply to begin the session with the prayer that precedes each session in the participant's book, then reading through the articles together, stopping when you or a student wishes to comment or raise a question. You could then close the session by discussing the questions at the end of the session and encouraging the group members to do the spiritual practice.

Unfortunately, that style of leading does not meet the needs of every kind of learner. The session plans encourage group leaders to try some new things to light up the hearts and minds of more people. Most teachers teach the way they like to learn. Choosing one new activity during each session will stretch you and open a door to someone who learns differently than you. Over the weeks, you will notice what your group enjoys and what they are unwilling to do. Let that, rather than your preferences, be your guide as you prepare to lead.

These session plans are designed to encourage group participation. Discussion and sharing create community and provide practice that all of us need in expressing our faith and wrestling with our questions. When asking questions, get comfortable with some silence while group members contemplate a response. Resist the urge to fill up the silence with your words.

If your group members like to talk, you might not be able to ask every suggested question. Also it will make a difference in your group session if group members have read the articles prior to the session. If you find it necessary to read from the participant's book during the group session, choose the passages that convey the core ideas.

You are more than a dispenser of information. In your role as group leader, you cooperate with God in the formation of faith and in the transformation of lives. You are the lead learner, modeling a way that faith seeks understanding. You are not trying to cover a lesson, but to uncover truth. Pray for yourself and your group members, prepare your session, relax, and enjoy!

May God bless your faithfulness!

Advent Hope

Scripture

Jeremiah 33:14–16; Romans 8:18–25; 1 Peter 1:3–9

Main Idea

Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. Our efforts for peace, justice, and reconciliation come from our hope and faith in Christ and are done for the sake of Christ.

Teaching Points

The session invites participants to consider:

1. Israel's hope in the God who liberated them from Egypt and who promised them hope.
2. Messianic hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ.
3. Their efforts for peace, justice, and reconciliation as extensions of their hope in Christ.

Resources Needed

Bibles

Participant's books

Advent wreath

Matches

Hymnals

Poster board, markers, paper, pen

Taper candles

Leader Prep

For Gather, prepare an Advent wreath by placing four purple (or whatever color combination your church uses) candles on a wreath with a white candle in the middle of the wreath. Visit the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) website for additional resources for Advent (presbyterianmission.org/ministries/worship/advent/). These may be helpful as daily devotional practices for participants.

For Head, discuss the three elements of hope that Israel had in God—“expectation of the future, trust, and patience in waiting”—as components of hope for Christians today. Conclude the section by introducing the anticipation of the “righteous Branch” from David’s line. This introduces a messianic dimension, which is important throughout Advent.

For Heart, introduce the idea that for Christians messianic hope is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In Christ, all God’s promises find their fulfillment (2 Corinthians 1:20). Dr. McKim discusses three dimensions for hope in Jesus Christ: past, present, and future. First, hope in Jesus Christ is rooted in God’s Old Testament promises and in the death of Christ as the means to salvation. It is also a living hope, here and now because Christ is alive (resurrection). Finally, hope looks to the future because ultimately, in life and death, our salvation comes from Christ—eternally.

For Hands, discuss the idea that instead of seeking “signs of the times,” the Bible emphasizes readiness and faith. Our efforts for peace, justice, and reconciliation are not ends in themselves but rather “witnesses” or “pointers” toward the One who is hope and gives hope. Note that throughout the study, Hands will include a mission project. A clothing collection is recommended; however, make adaptations to the mission project that better reflect the outreach passions of your congregation. Seek the help of your congregation’s mission and outreach committee if required.

Leading the Session

Gather

- If this is your first time together, invest time in introductions, maybe inviting everyone to share his or her favorite joke, movie, or song. This can be a gentle way of breaking the ice.
- If you are a continuing group, use this time to share joys and concerns.
- Explore the hymnal for Advent hymns about hope. Sing or read one of them together, and invite the group to reflect on the hymn text. Ask: *What does the hymn text convey about hope?*
- Introduce the candle-lighting liturgy, and prepare the group for the unison response (in bold) to the prayer:

Leader: Watch and wait for Christ's coming! We light candles of hope, peace, joy, and love, remembering the promises of God with prayer.

We light this candle in hope. (Light the first candle.)

Leader: Hear God's promise of hope.

(Read Jeremiah 33:14–16.)

Leader: Let us pray: God of hope, out of death you bring life. Renew us in hope, that we may be alert to the dawning of Christ's advent among us.

People: God of promise, God of hope, into our darkness come.¹

Head

- Review the first section of Dr. McKim's study "Hope in God," which explores hope in Israel. Invite the group members to offer their observations on Dr. McKim's assertion that the only source of hope for Israel was the God who had liberated the people from Egypt and who promises them hope.
- Invite volunteers to review Psalm 33 and Jeremiah 29 and make observations concerning the hope of Israel.
- Dr. McKim writes, "The promise to Israel was that the future belongs to God." This statement captures Israel's dependence on God (and, by extension, the same dependence by Christians). Discuss Dr. McKim's conviction that faith in God means an "open future," since we are to trust a God who guides us into the future. Ask: *How do you respond to despair in life, knowing that with God, anything can happen?*
- Discuss the three elements of hope in God: "expectation of the future, trust, and patience in waiting" as sources of hope for Christians today. Invite participants to share personal experiences of how they are aware of these elements in their Christian lives.
- Invite the group members to offer their perspectives on the Old Testament anticipation of the "righteous Branch" from David's line. Ask: *What does the symbol of a branch suggest about the messiah who is to come?*

1. Adapted from pcusa.org/media/uploads/worship/pdfs/lighting_the_advent_wreath.pdf.

Heart

- Introduce the “promise/fulfillment” scheme of Scripture: Christians understand many Old Testament promises to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah. Explain that the Old Testament provides the context and background to the continuing plan of salvation that God initiated and continues now in Jesus Christ. So in Christ, all God’s promises find their fulfillment.
- Read Romans 8:18–25; 2 Corinthians 1:17–24; and 1 Peter 1:3–9.
- Dr. McKim introduces three time dimensions for hope in Jesus Christ: past, present, and future. As you expand on these in discussion, emphasize that all three are important.
- Invite the participants to comment of the notion that Christian hope is living hope. Have volunteers share their personal reflections on their hope in Jesus Christ. Ask:
*How is your hope rooted in God’s Old Testament promises?
In the death of Christ as the means to salvation?
In what ways is your hope present and future?
In what ways is your hope a source of strength or
encouragement in the present?
How does your hope affect the way you think about
the future?*

Hands

- Explain that the second coming of Christ is an Advent theme. Emphasize that instead of seeking signs of the end times, the New Testament emphasizes readiness and faith. Discuss how this Advent theme emerges in daily life.
- Dr. McKim asserts that if Jesus Christ is the hope of the world, then our efforts for peace, justice, and reconciliation come from our faith in Christ and are done for the sake of Christ. Discuss ways our efforts witness or point to Jesus Christ, the One who is hope and gives hope.
- Invite the group to discuss how Christian commitments to action might be different from non-theological commitments. What difference does Christian hope make?

- Invite the group members to name ways the church enacts its hope in Christ during Advent, especially through its efforts to witness to peace, justice, and reconciliation.
- Suggest that the group express its faith during the course of the study by sponsoring a clothing tree. Have the group select a local mission agency to receive the clothing and a location where a clothing tree will be located in your church building. Then, form three groups. Have one group create publicity posters that can be displayed around the church; have a second group create a short article that can go in your congregation's newsletter or in an e-mail blast; and have a third group write a script for an announcement that can be made during worship. Following session 4, they will give the clothing to people in need.

Depart

- Gather the participants around the Advent wreath. Give each person a taper candle. Have each participant identify a group or individual who experiences hopelessness in your community, in your region, or in the world at large. Invite the group to respond to each named conflict with the following sentence prayer: God, give us hope. After each situation is named, have participants light their taper candles from the lighted candle. Conclude with prayer, in these or similar words:

Great God, we thank you for calling us to Advent hope in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ. Guide our feet so that our following is faithful and fruitful. To Christ be the glory. Amen.

- Extinguish the candles.

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Advent Hope

Scripture

Jeremiah 33:14–16 God promises a righteous branch from the line of David who will bring the people safety and hope.

Romans 8:18–25 The future glory of God will be revealed through hope that saves us.

1 Peter 1:3–9 We have a living hope of salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

O faithful God, in the midst of the darkness of despair, anxiety, or sadness, you bring hope. During long ages your people looked for your promise. They lived toward your word for deliverance, liberation, and safety. We now look and live as well. In Jesus Christ you are the God of hope. We receive all your blessings in him. We look toward your future saved by his life, death, and resurrection. We anticipate the future glory yet to be revealed. We believe your word. We live in faith. We abound in hope! Hear our prayer through Christ. Amen.

Introduction

In the weeks before Christmas, the church celebrates Advent. This season gets its name from the Latin term *adventus*, meaning “coming.” It is a season when the church prepares for Christmas Day—the great celebration of God the Savior coming to us in Jesus Christ. But the four Sundays before Christmas Day also mark a time of waiting and anticipation as the church looks with longing for Christ’s return to reign in glory.

Advent anticipation is often marked in churches by decorations, all the trappings for celebrating Christmas. Many churches feature an Advent wreath. Four candles are set in a circle, often with three purple candles and one that is pink. In the center is the white candle that symbolizes Jesus Christ and is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. At the beginning of worship during Advent Sundays, a Scripture

reading and prayer are often offered as one of the Advent candles is lit. Each week we can see by the lit candles how close we are getting to Christmas day. The Advent wreath is thus a calendar of Advent, marking the time as the church waits for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

In contemporary practice, each of the Advent Sundays is often associated with a theme that captures one dimension of Advent. The four themes are hope, peace, joy, and love. As we wait for Christ's coming, we focus on what Advent brings as Christ comes. These rich biblical and theological terms center us on the message we proclaim as we tell the world of the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the hope we have in Jesus Christ is rooted in the promises of God we find in the Old Testament. For long centuries, the people of Israel hoped for a messiah, God's "anointed one," the one God chooses to bring blessings to the people (Isaiah 9:1-7).

Our Advent journey begins in hope. Our Christian lives are lived in hope. We look to God's future as people of hope.

Hope in God

The ancient people of Israel were God's people. God entered into a covenant at Mt. Sinai, and in the giving of the law in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), God reminded the people they had received hope in being liberated from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:2). Then God showed the people how they were intended to live. Israel was God's "treasured possession" and a "holy nation" that lived by its trust in God's guidance and help (Exodus 19:5-6).

Israel's hope was focused on God. It had to be. With all the dangers and difficulties they faced, the people realized that only God could be their help (Psalm 124:8). The lives of the righteous people in Israel were grounded in hope. Even when they faced their darkest days, in exile in Babylon, God spoke through Jeremiah the prophet to say, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11; cf. 31:17). This promise of God was a certainty for the people, no matter how difficult their circumstances. The prayer of Israel was the prayer of the psalmist: "Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you" (Psalm 33:22).

The promise to Israel was that the future belongs to God. The people can hope because of what God can do. Hope brings confidence in God's protection and help. The people trusted the

character of the God who established covenants and promised good to the people, the God who out of steadfast love and faithfulness continually gave to the people in the present.

We find three elements combined in the hope Israel had

in God: expectation of the future, trust, and patience in waiting. These features are combined in the promise God made to Jeremiah of one who brings hope to Israel, a “righteous Branch” from the line of David. This is one who will “execute justice and righteousness in the land.” This one brings the days when “Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” This one “will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness’” (Jeremiah 33:14–16).

Israel expected a coming king from the line of King David, to whom God had promised that his offspring would be “made sure forever” (2 Samuel 7:16; cf. vv. 1–17). This coming king would reign in righteousness, in a time of peace where salvation would extend to the world.¹

This coming “messiah” or “anointed one” was expected throughout Israel’s generations. The people trusted God’s promise would come true. They lived from this hope. Even as they waited patiently and expectantly through the generations, Israel hoped in God and believed the promise of the Coming One who would establish a messianic age. This vision was captured in God’s word to the prophet Habakkuk, a vision of the time when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).

Hope in Jesus Christ

Advent is the season when the church listens to the Old Testament Scriptures as they express hope in God and anticipate God’s coming future. The promises given in the Hebrew Scriptures are not only for the people of Israel but for us as Christians as well. We too hope in God and wait with patience and expectancy, trusting God’s future reign to come.

In Advent, we hear of hope in God, and we anticipate the coming of the One who we believe fulfills all hope and prophecies: Jesus Christ.

1. Old Testament prophecies of the future Davidic king include Isaiah 7:14; 11:1–9; Ezekiel 17:22–24; Micah 5:1–3; Zechariah 9:9–10.

The promise to Israel was that the future belongs to God. The people can hope because of what God can do. Hope brings confidence in God’s protection and help.

The Christian church has seen Jesus Christ to be God's Messiah, the "anointed One" from the line of King David who has come to establish God's future kingdom—here in the present and in the days to come. We confess with the apostle Peter who, when Jesus asked him, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are

Our Christian faith is based on Jesus as the Christ, the "coming king," in whom we now place our hope.

the Messiah [Christ], the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Our Christian faith is based on Jesus as the Christ, the "coming king," in whom we now place our hope. As the apostle Paul put it, quoting Isaiah, "The root of Jesse shall

come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope" (Romans 15:12; cf. Isaiah 11:10).

Advent is the time when Christians look to Jesus Christ, in whom all the promises of God find their fulfillment (2 Corinthians 1:20). God is our hope; Christ is our hope. For us in the church, the promise of Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled in Jesus: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23).

Why do we hope in Jesus Christ? In the New Testament, hope in Christ has three dimensions: past, present, and future.

Past. Christian hope is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By the death of Christ our sin is forgiven, and we are reconciled with God. As Paul put it, "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10). Our salvation is possible because of Christ's death to save us. As the hymn puts it, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."²

Present. Christian hope now is a "living hope" that comes "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). The church's hope is alive and lived out in its ministries because Jesus Christ is alive and is with the church through the Holy Spirit. Advent is a time to wait in watchful anticipation for the coming of the Son of God who is "God with us" and who is always with us (Matthew 28:20).

Future. Christian hope, grounded in the living Christ, anticipates the future glory to be revealed. As Paul put it, "For in hope we were

2. "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," *Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), no. 379.

saved. . . . if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:24–25). The fullness of salvation and God’s coming reign will come when God wills. Till then, we anticipate the coming kingdom and work for it, but we wait patiently—in hope.

Hope for Us

On the first Sunday in Advent, we hope. We have a lot of dreams and desires for ourselves, our families, for others, and for the world. There are things we wish to be true and “hope” will be true.

Christian hope encompasses what we wish but brings our hopes and desires within the circle of the hope we have in God and in Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit of God, all God has done and will do becomes open for us. All we wish and hope for becomes part of God’s work in this world and God’s loving presence with us in Jesus Christ. So while our own hopes are real and important, they also point beyond themselves to the hope we have in Jesus Christ as we in the church seek to be Christ’s disciples.

In Advent, we prepare to celebrate the “coming” of Jesus Christ into our world. But Advent is also a time when the church looks to the future and to the “second Advent” or “second coming of Christ.” We affirm in the Apostles’ Creed that Christ will “come again, to judge the quick [living] and the dead.” The first Sunday of Advent points us toward “the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

Christians often speculate about the “second coming” of Christ, trying to figure out the “signs of the time” and to see if current events signal that Christ’s return to earth is near. Yet this focus is misguided. What we do know of Christ’s second coming is that no one knows “that day or hour” (Mark 13:32). Jesus will return at an “unexpected hour” (Luke 12:40). What the church has always believed is that the second coming is imminent—it can happen at any time; but it may not be immediate—it may happen far into the future. The emphasis in the Gospels is on watchfulness and wakefulness (Matthew 24:42; Mark 13:37), being ready—at any time—for Christ to return.

Christ’s advent means hope for us, every day. We celebrate Christ’s coming into the world at Christmas, to live and die and be raised again to forgive our sins and give us new life—“eternal life” (John 3:16) lived in the presence of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. No matter how dark our days or how apparently hopeless our situations may be, our hope is in Jesus Christ who is with us and

Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. All our efforts to establish justice, work for peace, and provide for the needs of others find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. All our efforts point beyond themselves to Christ.

through whose power “all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28).

Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. All our efforts to establish justice, work for peace, and provide for the needs of others find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. All our efforts point beyond themselves to Christ. As the Confession of 1967 puts it, “In the power of the risen Christ and the hope of his coming,

the church sees the promise of God’s renewal of human life in society and of God’s victory over all wrong.”³

This Advent, we can “rejoice in hope” (Romans 12:12).



Spiritual Practice

Think of hopes you have. In what ways do they relate to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit? During Advent, look for specific ways in which these kinds of hopes can be strengthened. Find ways to share Advent hope with others.



Questions for Reflection

What differences do you see between the hope for a Messiah that Jesus’ contemporaries had and the kind of Messiah that Jesus turned out to be?

In what ways do the three dimensions of hope in Jesus Christ—past, present, and future—shape and impact your Christian hope?

What hope for the world do you see in the coming of Jesus Christ? In what ways can our hopes for God’s future be put into practice now?

3. From the inclusive language version of the Confession of 1967 (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2002), 9.32; available at pcusa.org/resource/inclusive-language-version-confession-1967.