

Waiting

Spending Advent with the Psalms

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Introduction

Summer is barely over before the signs of Christmas become evident all around us. Stores start decorating in October. Lights and wreaths appear everywhere earlier and earlier in November. I was walking around local gardens in July, and the workers were wrapping the trees with lights, getting ready for the Christmas show that starts in late November. Decorations remind us of the cultural celebration awaiting us. All must be ready, prepared.

But somehow there's still not enough time to get it all done. There is so much to do, and more tasks seem to appear the earlier the Christmas lights go up. The list for everything I need to get done before Christmas feels as if it gets longer each year, compounding exponentially every day as Christmas approaches. I wrestle with all this, and with a culture that doesn't encourage us to slow down, to prepare, to wait for the gift God gives us at Christmastime.

I often wonder if we, as people of faith, take our cues about this season more from our economically driven culture than from our faith traditions. The decorated aisles at the stores and holiday ads interrupting our streaming services tell us that Christmas is coming, and soon. And we *should* get excited about the deep joy and promise of the Christ child coming to bring hope to our world. But Christians have also traditionally prepared for this joyous day quite differently compared to the frenzy around us.

Liturgically, Advent begins a new church year in the Christian calendar—in anticipation of Christmas, yes, but also as a season of spiritual reflection in its own right. Advent offers us a different kind of preparation than the one encouraged by the culture, an invitation that more and more faith communities across denominations are embracing. Rather than adopting a frantic pace getting ready for Christmas, Advent invites us to move more slowly, to pause and patiently prepare our hearts and minds and souls to live faithfully in response to God’s presence in our lives.

Advent is a time of waiting. In worship, texts from the Old Testament are often used during Advent to help us recall the world of God’s prophets and their words to people who were attuned to God’s presence in their lives centuries ago. These prophets tell about a time of God’s glory to come and the admonition to prepare, to get ready to receive a promised One who would deliver the people. We also hear passages from Matthew and Luke, who in their own distinctive ways tell the familiar stories of waiting leading up to the birth of God’s Son, our promised deliverer, Jesus. With hope, during Advent we remember God’s works of justice and mercy throughout the history of God’s people and look toward the new things that God promises to do.

Advent also marks the season of winter as we experience more darkness in our days and await the winter solstice. Advent moves us slowly toward the celebration of Christmas and the birth of Jesus who is the light of the world, symbolically felt in the gradual lengthening of the days after the solstice.

Just as Christians have pondered the words of the prophets during Advent for centuries, the Psalms—full of vivid expressions of faith and hope—can also remind us, as we wait for the coming of Jesus, of the reflection of God’s light and presence in the world of the ancient biblical writers, and help us see how the face of Jesus reflects that ever-present holy light. This study invites you to engage with one psalm every week of Advent, and through the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany, hearing each one in a variety of translations and paraphrases. You’ll have the chance to study each psalm with the help of contemporary biblical scholarship and then let it renew your spirit as you contemplate God’s abiding presence and care for humankind, from ancient times to these seasons of waiting and celebration today.

This study makes a bold move in inviting you to prepare to receive the gifts of God through the Psalms during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany and to consider how these seasons usher Christians into a new year in the church calendar. This unusual approach may leave you asking a few questions. Perhaps you're thinking, "Well, that's different!" You may be wondering how reading psalms will help orient you toward the coming of Jesus as you move through Advent. Or what it even means to celebrate Christmas as a season. What becomes of all that preparation and reflection once Christmas Day is over and decorations start to come down? And how is Epiphany connected to Advent? And what does praying psalms have to do with all of this?

First, let's ponder together what the Christmas season and Epiphany are all about. Some churches recognize and celebrate these seasons, while others don't, at least not overtly. Following Advent, the season of Christmas is observed for twelve days starting on December 25, reminding us that the celebration of the incarnation lasts more than a single day. Jesus has come, and we are invited to take our time and dwell in this extraordinary reality.

I have several nativities made out of wood that I put out at the beginning of Advent. I slowly add pieces. On Christmas, the baby joins the nativity. I leave these nativities in place as we delight in God coming to us in the birth of Jesus for these two weeks (twelve days) of Christmas. During this time, the magi are symbolically traveling, following the star to make their journey to visit the Christ child. Finally, on Epiphany, they arrive at the side of the Holy Family—strangers from far away whom God wants to be part of God's story. I add them to my nativities, completing the picture. These simple wooden figures help me remember the story, mark time, and practice both the waiting and the celebration of the seasons.

And to our other question: How do psalms also help us to practice this waiting and celebration, to enter more fully into each of these unique seasons? The Psalter, the hymnbook of the Israelites, is a rich resource of poetry for our reading and reflection during all seasons of the church year. Just as the ancient Israelites sang the Psalms throughout the year, so we sing or hear them in our worship regularly today, including during these special times of anticipation and joy.

In this study, the readings from the Psalter describe particular, consistent attributes of God that have been important to people of faith for centuries. Psalm writers provide us with glimpses of who they understood God to be. They were concerned with helping the Israelites remember that even in the darkest moments, God's face shined. When faced with challenging situations, the psalmists wanted them to remember that God's voice called God's people to live with acts of justice and peace.

Spending time with these psalms before and then in the midst of celebrating the birth of Jesus helps us to recognize how these attributes are embodied in the One whom God sent to live among us. Jesus came to breathe into us God's gifts of life and love. Meditating with these psalms can help us to better see how that life and love fill the stories of Jesus that we will read and remember during the rest of the liturgical year—how the whole biblical witness reflects the character of this ever-living God who comes to us in the incarnation.

Hearing and reading the Psalms also offers us something very different from the biblical narratives of the Christmas story alone, full of excitement and action. The poetry of the Psalms invites us to slow down, take our time, and imagine the context of the poet that evoked the psalm in a more intimate way. We can connect with the psalmist's thoughts, feelings, and images—then consider their connection with our own seasons of waiting, preparing, and rejoicing.

The first four weeks of this study are devoted to the weeks of Advent, arranged for group study under the theme "Waiting." Advent is about intentionally slowing down to tune in to the Spirit, and the psalms selected for this season provide glimpses of a merciful God whose face shines on God's people and who speaks peace to them. When days were dark, the psalmists reminded the people that God cares for humans and will always do great things for them. In a similar way, we know the season of Advent to be joyous and happy for some and a time of sadness for others who grieve the loss of loved ones who are no longer with them or suffer other hurts. Engaging with the words of the psalmists who describe the faithful love and presence of God offers reminders of how we can care for ourselves

and for others. Leader's guides are provided to help groups study and reflect together and pray with these psalms as a spiritual practice during Advent.

Christmas Day, the season of Christmastide, and Epiphany mark the transition into the time of "God with us"—the One we have been waiting for has arrived!—and these chapters are arranged under the theme "Abiding." These meditations are offered for individual reading and study, to carry you through the close of this year and into the new one—though reflection questions are still provided so that groups that are able and willing are welcome to keep meeting after Advent. Christmas Day and the Sundays in the Christmas season offer us time for remembering God's tender presence with us. The psalms you read here will help you see God as One who consistently acts justly and fairly, who offers a new song of mercy and justice for God's people to sing, and whom all of God's creation can't help but praise. These reminders of God's righteous actions are instructive for our own ways of acting in the world, bravely seeking to do the kinds of great things God hopes for.

Epiphany marks a decisive inbreaking of God's light into the world in a new way, revealing the welcoming and inclusive God who is compassionate to all people, including those who might not be in the "inner circle" according to human biases. The psalm for this day invites us to remember God as One who speaks powerfully to God's people, blessing them with God's compassion.

Like Mary waiting to give birth to her baby and the magi who followed a star of light over a great distance to worship the promised One, we wait. God's face shined on all those waiting for Jesus's birth. So we begin this Advent study looking at Psalm 80, reflecting on God whose face shines. The rest of the chapters pair psalms with attributes of God:

Waiting: Advent

Advent Week One, Psalm 80: God Whose Face Shines

Advent Week Two, Psalm 85: God Who Speaks Peace

Advent Week Three, Psalm 126: God Who Does Great Things

Advent Week Four, Psalm 8: God Who Cares for Humans

Abiding: Readings for Christmas and Epiphany

Christmas Day, Psalm 97: God Who Acts Justly

Christmas Week One, Psalm 148: God Whom We Praise

Christmas Week Two, Psalm 96: God's New Song

Epiphany, Psalm 29: God Who Speaks Powerfully and Blesses

Each chapter engages a single psalm with the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany and invites you to begin to see how an ancient hymn can connect with your own life of faith. Interpretive background work will help you attend to the psalm's form, meanings, and translations, and what it reveals about the psalmist and the psalmist's beliefs about God.

One thing to note about these psalms you will be reading is that some of them are ascribed to David. Scholars do not think David is the actual author of these pieces, though at times they do speak to circumstances in the narrative of his life. One way to think about this collection of hymns and poetry is that David is the sponsor, "the royal figure who authorized worship and its use of psalms in Jerusalem."¹ It may be helpful for you to imagine these words being written by someone just like yourself who is experiencing both the challenges of life and the hope in God's abiding presence.

After engaging with the psalm in the chapter and learning more about its content and meanings, you'll have a chance to meditate on the description of God selected as a theme to help you connect with the psalm more deeply and the ways the psalmist understood God's presence. You will be guided to make connections between the psalm, your own life, and life together in community during each of these sacred seasons. Finally, you will be invited to try the simple spiritual practice of praying the psalm throughout the week, exploring new ways to nurture your life of faith as you wait in expectation, then celebrate the arrival of God's holy presence in a new way in Jesus.

One additional resource in this book is brief devotions for each of the twelve days of Christmas (plus Epiphany), to provide a further daily rhythm of hearing and reflecting on smaller sections of the weekly psalm as you abide and find rest in these seasons.

Reading and engaging with *Waiting* offers you the chance to take up the practice of sitting with one psalm each week during Advent,

Christmas, and Epiphany. As the days shorten and the darkness grows, we light the candles in the Advent wreath, candles of hope, peace, joy, and love. This light and these words remind us of the One for whom we wait. The accompanying images of God revealed in the poetry of the psalm writers help us see how God is present in the life of the One whom God sent. Unlike the cultural invitation to count the shopping days left before Christmas, we are invited during this season to slow down and to wait to receive God's gift, all in preparation to reflect the gift of that light to others.

Waiting: Advent

Advent Week One

Psalm 80: God Whose Face Shines

Notice

Advent begins after the late days of fall have signaled the changing of seasons toward winter. Darkness creeps into the late afternoon, and we have fewer hours of daylight. Christmas lights start appearing on houses and porches, adding bright colors to the dark of night. In a time when our culture expects us to rush and make sure everything is done, getting gifts bought and wrapped and decorating the house, Advent invites us to slow down, to get ready in another way.

I love the Christian tradition of marking the season of Advent by putting an Advent wreath on our dining table, inviting the light into the growing darkness. Mine is a pottery wreath, made for me by a good friend. It is round and has a place to hold water for greenery and indentations for the four candles of Advent. The middle of the wreath is open for the Christ candle, waiting to be lit on Christmas Eve. I especially enjoy lighting a new candle each Sunday evening with friends and family, sharing a simple meal of soup and bread. The chance to move through Advent in the company of others helps me to stay connected with this season that invites us to wait and prepare, to get our houses and our souls ready to receive God's gift at Christmas. As I light the candles each week, I remember the faces of all those dear ones who have gathered at my table in other times and places as we have begun the season together.

During this study focused on the seasons of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, you will be reading and learning about eight different psalms. These psalms have been selected because they are often read in worship during these seasons. The Psalms offer a different perspective on these seasons alongside the usual Old Testament texts from the prophets or the Gospel accounts of the annunciation and the birth of Jesus. The psalm writers provide us with glimpses of the nature of God, steadfast and surprising. As we wait for the birth of the One whom God promised to send, these psalms help us remember how God reveals God's self in Jesus, God's Son.

We begin this study with Psalm 80, which is included in lectionary readings during the season of Advent. There is one phrase that is repeated three times in this psalm. The psalm writer asks God to "make your face shine." This psalm of lament offers a prayer of hope for God's continuing presence. One of my favorite hymns is "Christ, Be Our Light." The refrain echoes our hope for this season, and in our troubled times: "Christ, be our light! Shine in our hearts. Shine through the darkness. Christ, be our light! Shine in your church gathered today."¹

This psalm invites you to consider some of the ways and places where the light of God's face shines, bringing hope to a darkened world. The first candle lit during Advent also represents the theme of hope. As you enter this season of waiting in the darkness of winter, take time to reflect on Psalm 80 and its meaning for the Israelites many years ago and its meaning for you today.

Attend to Psalm 80

There are several things to notice about this psalm. First, Psalm 80 is a part of what is called the Elohistic Psalter, which includes Psalms 42–83. It has this title because in these psalms, God is referenced as Elohim rather than by the divine name, YHWH. The ascription of Psalm 80 names the psalm as "A testimony of Asaph." All the psalms in this section of the Psalter are attributed to the writing of Asaph, who was a musician and worship leader living in the time of King David. His name, Asaph, literally means "one who gathers or collects."

A second thing to notice is that this psalm is an example of a corporate cry for help. James Mays has pointed out that

the elements of [this type of psalm] are the same as those of the individual's prayer for help, with two exceptions. These prayers are composed primarily as the voice of the community, we instead of I. The corporate prayers feature recollections of God's way and work in the past. . . . The recollections contain some of the most important statements in the Psalter about God's way with Israel and the world. The prayers are the voice of a community that knows that its last and best hope lies in the sovereignty of its God.²

We don't know the exact context for the writing of Psalm 80, but we do know that the Israelites had many experiences of danger, hunger, and loss in the stories recounted in the Old Testament. Writing a prayer for God's people gathered in community waiting on God's help, the psalmist reminds them to remember, to remember that God has been faithfully present with them in the past and will continue to abide with them. The psalm also has four distinct sections. The opening in verses 1–3 calls on God to show up once again for the community. Verses 4–7 express what is going on with the people and why they are seeking God's presence. Verses 8–13 tells the history of God's connection with God's people. The psalm concludes with verses 14–19 and a plea for restoration, a return of God's presence with them.

Take some time to read Psalm 80. As you read, notice the movement of the psalm and the voice of the psalm writer and what is being asked of God. If you are reading this with a group, use four readers, one for each section, pausing after each section is read.

Psalm 80 (Common English Bible [CEB])

Prayer for Israel's Restoration

For the music leader. According to "Lotus Blossoms." A testimony of Asaph. A psalm.

¹ Shepherd of Israel, listen!

You, the one who leads Joseph as if he were a sheep.

You, who are enthroned upon the winged heavenly creatures.
Show yourself ² before Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh!

Wake up your power!

Come to save us!

³ Restore us, God!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

⁴ LORD God of heavenly forces,

how long will you fume against your people's prayer?

⁵ You've fed them bread made of tears;

you've given them tears to drink three times over!

⁶ You've put us at odds with our neighbors;

our enemies make fun of us.

⁷ Restore us, God of heavenly forces!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt.

You drove out the nations and planted it.

⁹ You cleared the ground for it;

then it planted its roots deep, filling the land.

¹⁰ The mountains were covered by its shade;

the mighty cedars were covered by its branches.

¹¹ It sent its branches all the way to the sea;

its shoots went all the way to the Euphrates River.

¹² So why have you now torn down its walls

so that all who come along can pluck its fruit,

¹³ so that any boar from the forest can tear it up,

so that the bugs can feed on it?

¹⁴ Please come back, God of heavenly forces!

Look down from heaven and perceive it!

Attend to this vine,

¹⁵ this root that you planted with your strong hand,

this son whom you secured as your very own.

¹⁶ It is burned with fire. It is chopped down.

They die at the rebuke coming from you.

¹⁷ Let your hand be with the one on your right side—

with the one whom you secured as your own—

¹⁸ then we will not turn away from you!

Revive us so that we can call on your name.

¹⁹ Restore us, LORD God of heavenly forces!

Make your face shine so that we can be saved!

Psalm 80 has been described as a “pathos-filled lament concerning a public devastation, perhaps with reference to the destruction of Jerusalem.”³ It shares similarities in its structure with other corporate psalms. The psalm begins with a request for God’s help: listen, wake up your power, save us, restore us. Then, throughout the psalm, you hear the refrain that is repeated three times: “Make your face shine so that we can be saved!” (CEB).

A second feature of this kind of psalm is the description of the trouble that the psalm writer is experiencing. It is evident in verses 8–13. Israel, whom God had nurtured and loved, is now torn apart. In verses 14–19, there is a plea for God to return and restore God’s people.

It’s helpful to recall the history of the Israelites to understand the images that the psalmist uses. One commentary writer has described verses 8–13 as a “poetic history lesson.”⁴ The exodus of God’s people out of slavery in Egypt is described here as the vine that God saved, planted, and nurtured in a new home. The agricultural setting of Israel is the background of this part of the psalm.

In reciting this history lesson, the psalmist wants the Israelites to remember how God has cared for them, though he is also honest about his bewilderment at the destruction the community is now facing. “Verse 12 is the heart of the matter. The question is as haunting as verse 4. Why have you, God, destroyed what you have worked so hard to build?”⁵ A traumatized people, believing that God is in charge of all, asks with desperation why God would bring them destruction. This is a very honest cry of the heart, and we should read it as such, rather than as a theological truth about God’s desire to destroy.

Ultimately, even in lament, the psalmist has not lost hope in the goodness of God to rescue the people from devastation. Consider the way that the refrain—repeated three times in this psalm—has been translated or paraphrased by different translators and writers (v. 3):

God, come back!
 Smile your blessing smile:
That will be our salvation.
 —Eugene Peterson,
 The Message (MSG)
 (paraphrase)

Living God, cause us to return;
 Light up your face and we will be saved.
 —Pamela Greenberg, *The Complete*
 Psalms: The Book of Prayer Songs
 in a New Translation

O God, bring us back,
 and light up Your face that we may be rescued.
 —Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*,
 vol. 3, *The Writings* (Ketuvim)

Restore us, God!
 Make your face shine so that we can be saved!
 —CEB

Restore us, O God;
 show Your favor that we may be delivered.
 —*Tanakh (JPS)*⁶

Notice the different ways each of these writers has translated or paraphrased this refrain. Three of them ask God to restore or bring the people back into relationship with God. Two others articulate a different request: Eugene Peterson's paraphrase asks for God to return, and Pamela Greenberg asks for God to help the congregation return.

In each version, the request of the psalmist on behalf of the congregation suggests a deeply personal relationship. "Make your face shine." "Light up your face." "Smile your blessing smile." Recall other texts in the Old Testament where God's face is sought. God told Moses that he could not see God's face. Yet God is also described as speaking to Moses "face-to-face" like a friend. Elijah, seeking God's

presence on Mount Horeb (the same mountain as Sinai, where God spoke with Moses), shielded his face when God passed by. When Hagar was sent into the desert to die by Sarah, God's messenger appeared, and she becomes the first woman to name God, whom she calls *El Roi*—God who sees—painting an image of God who perceives as we do, with God's eyes.

God's face, meaning God's presence, had been missing during this time when the psalm was written. The experience of disruption in the community's relationship with God is vividly described in their request to see and experience again God's blessing smile, the light of God's face, God's favor. Another commentator reflects, "Audacious hope is what I find most remarkable about this psalm. . . . Israel is walking in darkness due to the apparent turning away of God's face, plagued by questions of 'Why?' and 'How long?' . . . Still, the psalmist is convinced that God can and will restore Israel."⁷

The questions of the Israelites are ours today. We, too, ask, "Why did this happen?" "How long will the destruction last?" "When will we be safe again?" We seek hope in the midst of a time of darkness when there are more questions than answers. The words of the psalmist and the promise of God's face bringing light offer comfort and hope to us as much as they did to the Israelites.

Connect with This Psalm during Advent

What connections can be made with this psalm during Advent? The psalmist vividly expresses a desire for God's face to shine. The memory of God's abiding presence perhaps makes this time of waiting in the midst of feeling abandoned even more difficult.

This psalmist was writing in the days when the people could remember the destruction of Judah or of the temple. He asks for God's face to shine so that restoration may be possible. One interpreter of Psalm 80 has observed that "when God's face shines, there is power to bring to life . . . that which has been trampled."⁸ In the psalm, the poet pleads with God as a gardener to gently mend the broken and bruised vine. Then perhaps God, as the source of light and life, like the sun, can provide the warmth the vine needs to stretch out and grow again.

Perhaps Mary, Jesus's mother, knew better than anyone what it meant to wait for God's face to shine, as her belly grew and she wondered about God's purpose in sending God's Son to be born to her. Of course, she had an idea from the angel Gabriel about the purpose of the coming of God's Son. Gabriel tells her Jesus will be given the throne of David and rule over his kingdom forever (Luke 1:32–33). It's important to remember that in the first century, Judah was a land that was occupied and oppressed by the Romans, and it had been under the thumb of several empires before that, often left without the ability to rule itself. The Jewish people had longed regularly for God's presence over the centuries, for God's face to shine on them and restore them. Mary understood this and shared the hope of God making all things right, as she exults in the Magnificat that God has "come to the aid of his servant Israel, remembering his mercy, just as he promised to our ancestors, to Abraham and to Abraham's descendants forever" (Luke 1:54–55 CEB). She had faith that in a land infiltrated with injustice, God was already pulling the powerful down from their thrones and lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry and sending the rich away (vv. 52–53). But what she didn't know was exactly how this would come to be and how this would take place through her son. Perhaps like any mother who waits to meet her child, she wondered, hoped, and prayed for the good he would do in the world.

We, too, long and wait for God's shining face, in a world that is broken and bruised by injustice but struggling toward hope, where the lowly continue to suffer. We, too, face circumstances that we do not control in our communities and families, look for God's mercy and grace, and work to bring the love of God into their midst in our own imperfect ways. Another commentator has reflected on how this psalm can be heard in this season: "This is the yearning of Advent, for the coming of this Lord, the one who gathers up all our good and mistakes and misdeeds and misdirected dreams and weaves them together into God's good purpose."⁹

We don't know exactly how it will all come to pass, but we have faith that it will. Like the psalmist who asks for God to revive, return, and restore, we wait for the birth of the promised One who will gather, forgive, and redirect our words and actions toward "God's

good purpose.” We anticipate seeing the light of God’s face in the face of the baby who is coming to make a way for us in the darkness.

Praying This Psalm during Advent

During Advent, when the culture encourages our busy preparations for Christmas, the Psalms provide a different invitation, to settle into and engage the poetry of how humans and God relate to each other. Konrad Schaefer suggests that there are three ways we can appreciate psalms. The first way is to understand the culture and setting of the poet. A second way is to notice the title or caption of the psalm. A third way is to notice your own engagement with the psalm, believing that “the reader and the poet share the garden plot of human experience.”¹⁰ Even across time and distance, we are growing in the same soil as the psalm writers, sharing the gift of human life that God has given everyone.

Because of this essential connection, Schaefer believes that the act of praying psalms in particular can “give them a home in the reader’s context . . . [so] that the psalms become a catalyst to draw the reader out of the limited experience of the self and provide new possibilities for expression.”¹¹ One’s own experience and the experience of the psalmist come into a kind of dialogue in the space of prayer, spanning historical contexts and differences without erasing them, to come near to God in a new way.

Psalm 80 reflects a time of difficulty the Israelites had when they were feeling distant from God, waiting for a return to a time when God’s face would be clearly in view. They remembered when God’s hand could be felt, when God’s face shined on them.

How does one go about praying a psalm? Here are some simple steps to help you begin this practice:

1. Find a space and time that offers you silence. Plan for this time and honor it as a way to grow in your spiritual life. You could have a focusing object like a candle or the first candle in your Advent wreath.
2. As you prepare to pray with this psalm, think about “the garden plot of human experience” that you share with this psalm

writer. Read the psalm again, slowly focusing on each verse. Reflect on how you hear God's voice speaking back then and speaking now to you.

3. Close with the refrain of the psalm, using portions of it as a breath prayer. A breath prayer is a prayer that can be prayed in one breath. Pray these phrases in one breath: "Restore us, God! Make your face shine." Breathe in and say, "Restore us, God!" Breathe out and say, "Make your face shine." Do this three times. Then sit in silence before you move into the rhythms of your life.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What darkness have you waited in?
2. When have you felt the light of God's face shining before you?
3. The psalmist asks God to look down and see. What would you like for God to see?
4. How does this psalm speak to your experiences in life?