

The year is 538 BC.

You, having spent the last 70 years as an exile in Babylon, have finally been permitted to return to Jerusalem – your homeland; the *promised* land.

In many ways, it feels like a dream. Your anticipation to return to this place -- an anticipation soaked in memories of that sweet, sweet taste of milk and honey on your lips. The memory of a land that you never stopped calling home has finally – after all these years – gone from hope to *happening*.

Yes, indeed, you are going *home*.

Life as it was, in general, will surely resume, you think to yourself.

That is, of course, until you see it.

You arrive back to find a home – if that’s what you can even call it anymore – that is downright unrecognizable to the one you left.

That land on which a towering temple once stood, is now covered only in broken bricks and rubble.

You turn the stones beneath your feet, and all that comes back to you is dust. This *can’t* be the place that you remembered. This *can’t* be the same land you yearned for back in exile.

The words of the prophet Isaiah feel as close and as piercing as they ever have:

Your sacred cities have become a wasteland;
even Zion is a wasteland, Jerusalem a desolation.
Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned with fire,
and all that we treasured lies in ruins.
After all this, Lord, will you hold yourself back?

I don't believe it takes very much for all of us today to know – intimately – the desolation, anguish, isolation, and yes, even anger of our prophet.

Indeed, for many of us, this year has been one saturated in its own kind of devastation, exhaustion, and loss. It's been a year spent wondering if the people and comforts we have grown so used to will still be there when we wake up the next morning. A year spent praying that we wouldn't have to attend a funeral over Facebook Live or Zoom.

It's been a year of difficult and downright impossible choices. A year of longing for family and friends and church and community and normalcy. Perhaps it was a year with one less setting at the Thanksgiving table.

This year has left our bodies and minds and souls fatigued beyond measure. It is a year in which the words of our gospel writer to STAY AWAKE! Feel far more like punishment than they do promise.

Indeed, at first glance our scripture texts today seem to offer little comfort, painting a picture that feels far more bleak and – let's be honest – *frustrating* than Advent should feel. If this is, in fact, the season of light, why does it feel so dark?

But it's here, in this very moment, in this very feeling, that we must pause. We must listen once more, and this time more slowly.

You, O Lord, are our Father
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

You see, even in the prophet's anguish, he knows that there is something more than the rubble and soot that sits before him, obstructing the view.

No, he knows deep down, at his very core that the foundation on which God's most glorious temple stands is not one of mortar and stone. Rather, this temple, a temple built in fulfillment of God's covenant to God's people, is something different. Made of materials impermeable to fire or famine or war.

No, this temple is built instead of a soil molded not of man, but by the very hands of God.

You, O Lord, are our Father
We are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.

This Sunday, we enter a new year in the life of the church. This new year begins, as it always does – not with banging pots, giant incandescent balls, or fireworks – but instead with a promise that is far more still; far more slow. A promise so soft and quiet that the gospel writer knows it’s worth reminding us to stay alert and all attentive to what presents itself to us in this season.

In a recent reflection, Duke Divinity School professor, author, and self-described “incurable optimist”, Kate Bowler, recalls a moment of intentional gratitude while staying with her parents in their Canada home. She writes:

At the first sight of snow, my seven-year-old, Zach ran outside screaming. I mean, screaming.

“Oh hello snoooooow!! Welcome to my life!”

For a boy who has grown up in mild North Carolina winters, this year’s first snowfall in Winnipeg, Manitoba, felt extra magical.

I was also aware that it was not a small miracle to be there, at my mom’s house, making banana fritters with caramel drizzle, ice cream, and extra sprinkles (per Zach’s request)

We have this little tradition [in my family] that when the first snow sticks on the ground, we MUST make donuts that very night. In Canada, the snow falls and stays far beyond its welcome – oh I don’t know, UNTIL JULY. So we make an effort to celebrate before we get tired of all this cold and don’t feel very celebratory any longer...

Further down, she continues.

When a pandemic or disease or grieving a loss shrinks the walls of our lives, we can begin to believe that hope has been lost. That the lives we had before are over. That we may never again experience the joys and dreams and horizons we once assumed were infinite. That there is nothing left to celebrate.

*Yes, things have changed. Yes, life looks different and our limitations are so much more obvious. Yes, we are lonely and sick and hungry for a taste of normalcy. But today, there is no life *in general. **

Praise God. There are only fritters... [Tiny moments] to celebrate that yes, life has changed. But no, it has not taken everything.

It can be so tempting to focus on the parts of this year that feel lost to us. Indeed, it can be tempting to know the snow on the ground only as that which hinders our travel, keeps us cold and apart, and won't seem to just *go away* even as a new season approaches.

But, my friends, the promise of Advent invites us into a different story. A different way of being and seeing. It calls us to recognize that there is, in fact, *magic* in the mystery. *Hope*, that even when it seems there is nothing but devastation and loss around us, that God is erecting a temple, molded by the very clay that is God's own people, and fixed on a foundation that's just about as impossible as it gets. It is a temple built on a foundation that is the Christ child, lying cold and naked in a manger – come to deliver us from sin and death and desolation. Come to deliver us from the seemingly inescapable hopelessness and into light, faith, peace, and yes, joy – even, and especially, where it feels impossible.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a twentieth century theologian whose legacy was largely defined by his resistance efforts against Hitler's regime. From 1943 up until his eventual execution in 1945, Bonhoeffer penned several letters which were smuggled out of prison. In one letter addressed to his parents, he reflected on the meaning of advent. He wrote:

"We can, and should also, celebrate Christmas despite the ruins around us.... I think of you as you now sit together with the children and with all the

Advent decorations—as in earlier years you did with us. We must do all this, even more intensively because we do not know how much longer we have.”

I suppose the only question we're left with is, *how?* How might we enter into this season, even as the dust and rubble remain fixed at our feet – even as the snow stays well beyond its welcome and the flames of hardship, injustice, and loss continue to roar?

Well, perhaps it could start with fritters.

Intentional acts of noticing the good – the *God* – that surrounds us, just as God did in those days in Jerusalem.

Maybe, finding the *hope* in Advent looks less like looking for God in the earthquakes and boiling water and more like scouring the quiet streams that trickle down the hillside.

A friend of mine has recently taken up a practice on social media. Each day, she names something small and insignificant, that brings her some form of delight. She calls them *tiny joys*, and they can range anywhere from fancy maraschino cherries to knowing the sound a blue jay makes and being able to recognize when they're nearby.

Where are your tiny joys?

Where might hope be calling to you today – yes, even in this very moment?

This season, it is my prayer for us all that we might be aware of all the big and small moments worthy of delight and donuts. For it is there, when our attention and intention is set and secure, that we will find God and God's promise for a new life and hope to bring light into this darkness.

Yes, even in the rubble of all that has been, the promise remains: God is has not left us.

For unto us a child is born. Unto us a son has been given. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace

Thanks be to God.