

Jer. 33:14–16

Ps. 25:1–10

1 Thess. 3:9–13

Luke 21:25–36

Living in the Meantime

Goal for the Session

As Paul encouraged the Thessalonian community, adults will explore ways to open themselves and others to Advent's encouragement and hope.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Allen Hilton

Consolation does not exhaust Paul's purpose for his eschatological moment. He will not have these Thessalonians sitting on their rooftops. Rather, he chases his words of assurance with a strong call to vigilance and right living in the meantime. Because the longed-for Son will come “like a thief in the night,” the Thessalonians should be constantly ready for his coming—by living as children of light, embodying faith and love. And this watchful, awake way of living is not a private or isolated undertaking, but involves the work of mutual edification. The day of reunion will come. The meantime is full of mundane preparations for it.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” James H. Evans Jr.

The major Christian doctrine illuminated by this text is Christian hope. It is significant that this earliest of Paul's letters would center on hope. As the church dealt with the delayed Parousia, the notion of hope moved from the foreground to the background in doctrinal reflection. It is hope that draws both love and faith into maturity. Because this text rests on the foundation of hope, Paul's prayer in verse 12—“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you”—can be understood as an exhortation and testimony to imperfect people pursuing a perfect love.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Philip E. Campbell

On the First Sunday of Advent many congregations light the hope candle. A vision of “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” can encourage hope, regardless of how or when it occurs, whether the hearer conceives of this coming literally in history or metaphorically in the experiences of individuals and communities. To be ready for the “coming of our Lord Jesus” is a faithful way of living not dependent on predictions as to when. Endings and beginnings abound. Personal tragedy or world calamity can intrude at any time. Faithful preparation and expectant living can help us face whatever comes.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Joseph R. Jeter

We are called to do the best we can to live lives pleasing to God. And though we will surely fail to live up to the high standards of perfection, we can be grateful for those things we have done for God and live in hopeful confidence that the love and mercy of the risen Christ will not let us go. As Tennyson wrote of his faith, “Not one life shall be destroyed, or cast as rubbish to the void.” And there is more. Remember, when Jesus comes, he will bring with him those who have gone before, those whom we have loved and lost a while.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

**1 Thessalonians
3:9–13**

Focus on Your Teaching

Adults enter the season of Advent with a wide range of agendas and feelings. Many adults will already be preparing for gifts and gatherings. For some adults, the year's longest hours of night coincide with personal experiences of grief that are heightened by the approach of the holidays. Others may find Advent triggering reflections on endings and beginnings taking shape in their own lives as one year moves toward the next. This session seeks to encourage adults to live with hope that embraces Advent's remembrance of Christ's birth and its expectation of Christ's second coming.

God, bring peace to calm my anxieties. Bring light to my mind and heart as I plan this session. Encourage me as I lead the group who will gather. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- Bibles
- Advent wreath with four candles, lighter, table, cloth
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 9, 2018
- newsprint
- marker

For Responding

- option 1: board or newsprint and markers
- option 2: blank notecards and envelopes, pens
- option 3: copies of Resource Sheet 2, Part 2

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

In advance of the session, cover a table with a cloth. Place the Advent wreath with candles on top. Follow your congregation's custom for colors of candles and cloth. Two common options for candle colors are all four blue or purple, or three blue or three purple and one pink. Also, write the "commissioning" phrase found in Closing on newsprint, and post out of sight until it is used (text is given in Closing).

Welcome adults and introduce any visitors or guests. Thank the participants for choosing to come into this community today as you begin this season of Advent, whose name comes from a Latin word meaning "a coming toward."

Form pairs. Have each partner offer responses to this: What or who encourages you to live with hope? How?

Gather the group. Ask: In what ways did hearing your partner's source of hope encourage you?

Light the first Advent candle, and note that some traditions refer to it as the "hope" candle.

Offer these or similar words for prayer:

God of hope, we come into your presence this first Sunday of Advent grateful for this community, open to the gift and challenge of hope you bring to us in your Word and in this season. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Luke passage closes a longer set of apocalyptic or “end time” teachings. Some adults may recoil from such imagery. If so, ask: What might be the importance for hope of including such a passage in every Advent’s yearly lections?

EXPLORING

Read 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13 aloud. Invite general comments, reactions, or questions. Simply make note of the questions at this point.

Distribute copies of both resource sheets. Ask adults to silently read Resource Sheet 2, Part 1 (The Challenges of Hope Delayed: The Thessalonian Community). Do the same with the “What?” and “Where?” excerpts on Resource Sheet 1. Have participants lift up key ideas that these materials bring to understanding the background of today’s text.

Choose partners or form small groups. Read the passage aloud once again. This time, pause after each set of verses indicated below is read so that pairs or groups may discuss the following questions:

- ✧ Verses 9–10: What does this tell us about the relationship between Paul and the Thessalonians?
- ✧ Verses 11–12: What is the importance of Paul’s encouraging this community to love with these two “specifications”: 1) for all; 2) as we love you?
- ✧ Verse 13: What do you find most encouraging, and most challenging, in this verse?

Invite the adults to imagine they are responsible for creating Advent greeting cards on the theme of encouragement and hope. Have them read through two of the other lections for today, Jeremiah 33:14–16 and Luke 21:25–36, and identify phrases that could be borrowed to express this season’s encouragement and hope. Identify such phrases from the Thessalonians passage as well. Option: Spend time exploring the apocalyptic imagery in the Luke passage. What does the passage and its imagery as a whole contribute to the meaning of hope—and to what the coming Advent expects?

Invite adults to listen to one verse from the psalm designated for this first Sunday in Advent through the filter of the grief and discouragement felt by the Thessalonians. Read Psalm 25:3 aloud.

- ✧ How might the “waiting” of the psalm connect to the Thessalonians’ emotions of grief and discouragement before receiving Paul’s letter?
- ✧ How might the “waiting” of the psalm connect to the waiting that is at the core of the season of Advent; to the waiting that is part of our lives in the midst of grieving and discouragements?
- ✧ In the light of Thessalonians, what is the church called to wait for in the season of Advent that begins today?

EASY
PREP

There may be a wide divergence of opinion and comfort level among your adults regarding second coming beliefs. Encourage the adults to hold a positive balance between the two extremes reflected in the resource sheet.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Live with Hope** Having hope is the first step to offering hope to others. Read aloud the goal for today's session printed at the top of your leader's guide. Identify contemporary issues and experiences that might cause individuals and communities of faith to become discouraged or lose hope. Record these on one sheet of newsprint. Next, identify ways that today's passage and your conversations in this session have identified reasons to find encouragement and hope in this season of Advent. Brainstorm ideas for how individuals and groups in your church might become not only sources of such encouragement and hope for others, but how we might perhaps first open ourselves to such encouragement and hope. One possible line of conversation here would be to talk about spiritual practices that might help in this.
- 2. Bringing Encouragement** Adults will engage in a practical exercise of encouraging others. Recall the Exploring activity of identifying phrases in today's lections for use in "imaginary" Advent cards. Distribute the blank notecards and envelopes. Explain adults are to work individually, identifying one person or family who might need encouragement in this season of Advent. Create an Advent greeting card to send by writing the Advent phrase on the cover of the notecard, perhaps illustrating it as well, and writing a more personal message inside.
- 3. Advent and the Second Coming** Advent hope encompasses preparing for Christ's first coming at birth as well as Christ's second coming. Read and then discuss Part 2 of Resource Sheet 2 (Advent and Christ's Second Coming: Abdication and Obsession). Explore ways in which individuals and your congregation might hold together Advent's literal meaning of "coming toward" not just as preparation for the coming of Christmas, but as faithful expectation of Christ's second coming and God's sovereign realm.

CLOSING

Gather in a circle around or in front of the Advent wreath. Recall this session's beginning with persons or things that serve as sources of encouragement and hope in our lives. Invite participants to think back over this session and call out words or phrases of something they will take from this session that is encouraging and hopeful for them.

Post or hold the newsprint sheet with the commissioning prayer ("*Name*, wait with hope, serve with joy, and love as you are loved by the One whose coming we prepare") so that everyone can see and read it easily. Explain that you will begin by offering the commissioning to the person on your right, starting with his or her name. Then, that person offers the prayer to the next individual on the right, and the commissioning continues around the circle until all have received and offered it.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for December 9, 2018, or e-mail it to the participants early in the week to allow time for reading and reflection.

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Advent's Encouragement and Caution

Part 1 The Challenges of Hope Delayed: The Thessalonian Community

Thessalonians is believed to be the earliest of all the New Testament writings. Paul wrote to the community partially in order to address a crisis in the church. There was an expectation in the early church of Jesus' imminent return (see, for example, Matthew 16:28 and Mark 9:1). What troubled the Thessalonians was that some from the community had died before Christ's return.

What would become of them? The more extended treatment of that issue in this letter is 4:13–18. It is notable that Paul does not write to deny the grief experienced by the community. His point is that they not grieve as those who grieve without hope. Also connecting to today's passage is verse 18: "Therefore *encourage* one another with these words." Encouragement is not only the purpose of Paul in writing—it becomes the ministry entrusted to the Thessalonians.

Part 2 Advent and Christ's Second Coming: Abdication and Obsession

In his book *Theology of Hope*, Jürgen Moltmann makes a historical observation about the twin dangers that face Christian hope or "eschatology." That word literally means the study of "last things," a term often associated with beliefs regarding the end time or the second coming. Moltmann writes:

"The more Christianity became an organization for discipleship under the auspices of the Roman state religion and persistently upheld the claims of that religion, the more eschatology and its mobilizing, revolutionizing, and critical effects upon history as it has now to be lived were left to fanatical sects and revolutionary groups."

—Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 15.

Moltmann's comments refer to ancient history—but it is history frequently repeated. When mainline traditions scrub Advent clean of second coming connections, we abdicate their rightful place to those who obsess upon timetables and trying to conform modern events into literal fulfillments of Revelation's largely figurative language. The result? We are all the poorer.

Those who predict the end of the world to a particular date and time bring ridicule upon the church. Meanwhile, those who want nothing to do with exploring the meaning behind apocalyptic literature domesticate hope into mere optimism that may or may not be tenable. And in terms of the celebration of Advent, we lose the vital connection between the mangled Babe in Bethlehem and the coming Sovereign at the end of history.

- ✠ Where do you see both extremes at work: in your own thoughts; in the wider church?
- ✠ In what ways might your congregation faithfully balance Advent as preparation not only for the birth of Jesus but as expectation for the coming of Christ and God's realm fully realized?

