A Surprising Hope

Seeking Wisdom in the Advent Night
A Spiritual Retreat

By Katie Harmon-McLaughlin, Spiritual Formation Ministries
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Advent Spiritual Retreat: How to use this resource...
You are invited into a time of Advent spiritual retreat as an individual or in a small group. Take the time you need as you encounter this resource. You may choose to designate one full day, a weekend, or a few evenings. Find a comfortable place in your home or seek out a space that will allow you to be prayerfully available. There is no need to “accomplish” this material in a particular order or time frame. The writings, questions, practices, and songs are available as a guide. They are intended to serve as prompts for your own reflection and prayer. Let it be for you what you need it to be. May these words and practices bring blessing and peace in this Advent season!

Materials Needed:
• Bible
• Journal
• Community of Christ Sings (Hymnal)
• Candle

Suggested Resources for this retreat:
• “The Longest Night” by Peter Mayer (available on itunes or youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ub6yyaDVG3Y)
• “By Night” available on itunes (Album: “In God Alone: Songs of Taizé”) or youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSTdw3Vth0A
• “Within Our Darkest Night” available on itunes (Taizé Community Choir) or youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J8BmyxqJH0g
• “Wait for the Lord” available on itunes (Album: “In God Alone: Songs of Taizé”) or youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7GexLVX8HU
**Entering The Advent Night**

“Make a place for yourself in the darkness and wait there. Be there.”

- Denise Levertov

Some things must wait until morning. The urgencies that awaken us in the middle of the night can swirl in our hearts, but we know as our eyes widen, heavy in the surrounding darkness, that these pressing demands cannot be met now. That phone call can’t be made at 3:00AM, or the trip to the doctor to check out the lingering health concern you haven’t properly tended.

Most likely, you enter this retreat in the morning, so it might feel disorienting to start in the dark. For our purposes, we are using the metaphor of night to encompass the season of Advent as a whole even though our lives continue throughout this waiting time in the full light of day.

There is something about the night that holds our attention in a different way, making us more alert to each creak in the floorboards as we await the rise of the sun. As you prepare to enter more fully the Advent night, you are invited to ponder in your heart, **what in my life must wait until morning? What are the competing voices, priorities, and demands that threaten to distract me from what is emerging in the quiet darkness of my inner life?**

Trust that there will be time enough later for everything vying for your attention. For now, the night is calling; those interior dark spaces are waiting to reveal to you the God-with-us forming within.

**Practice: Dwelling in Song**  “By Night” Community of Christ Sings #551

1 (Text: Luis Rosales) You are invited to sing, listen to, or speak this hymn repetitively, allowing the words to sink into you, opening a space for reflection and prayer.

**Journal:** What is the thirst that leads you onward into the Advent night? What are you searching for in this retreat experience?

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1 “By Night” available on itunes (Album: “In God Alone: Songs of Taizé”) or youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YSTdw3Wth0A
Symbols for Advent: Light & Warmth in Waiting Times

It was a day of lingering despair and a weighted heart. Advent darkness encompassing me, I drove to the store in the fading light. Harsh winter winds greeted me as I opened my car door. I needed just a few things, but wandered down the aisles, searching for something I could not name.

I try to avoid impulse shopping, but I left the store with two unplanned items that had caught my attention: a blanket and a candle. Arriving home, I placed the pine pillar candle in a holder and lit it, focusing my heart’s attention on the flickering flame. I curled up under the blanket on the couch and spent a few moments in the silence, trying to make sense of what was stirring within me.

In those sacred moments of enclosing cold and darkness, I realized slowly that these two items were more than spontaneous purchases, but symbols of my soul’s deep desire. They were what I needed to get through this winter-time.

Advent is a season for mining the treasures of expectant darkness. In the Northern Hemisphere, the light itself matches the season. Each day, the minutes of darkness outnumber the minutes of light. It draws our attention to the things we might not see in the full light of the summer sun.

We may want a quick fix or to move swiftly to a season of great warmth and light, but the Spirit invites us to pause here and pay attention. What about this season signals the deeper desires of your soul? What can you learn from these deeper desires? How does this awareness form within you the promise of new life?

Sometimes practices of spirit are this simple. Wrap up in a blanket for comfort and warmth on cold days. When the uncertainty-darkness increases in your soul, enter in and light a candle for hope. Greater light will come, but for now appreciate the light that is, even in its rarity. Find the symbols of your soul’s deep desire that can be seen more clearly in the dim light of the fading sun.

Journal: What is revealed about your soul’s deep desire in this waiting time of Advent? What symbols sustain you in the cold, dark nights of faith?
Practice: Holding in the Light

This Quaker prayer invites us to place persons and concerns in the light of God’s Spirit. Sit quietly, close your eyes, and breathe calmly. Be aware of God’s presence. Allow an image to form in your mind of the person or concern you wish to pray for. See the person or concern being surrounded and held in God’s light. Feel or sense this healing light even if you do not have an image of it. Open your heart to God’s love for the person and continue to hold them in the light for five to ten minutes. Trust that words are not necessary because God already knows the need. Use this prayer to hold discernment questions or other healing needs in God’s light. (Carolyn Brock, Yearning for God)

Practice: Dwelling In Song

“Maybe light itself is born in the longest night…” Peter Mayer

Listen to “The Longest Night” by Peter Mayer.2

• Pay attention to words, phrases, or images that capture your attention in this song.
• What is the invitation for you in this song? What is revealed in the long, dark nights of your life?

2 “The Longest Night” by Peter Mayer (available on itunes or Youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ub6yvaDVG3Y)
TRUSTING THE VISION
Practice: Lectio Divina

*Lectio Divina* is a form of praying with scripture. Breathe deeply and become aware of the presence of God. Enter into the text and allow yourself to be immersed in this living invitation for your life today.

As you read this text, listen within for a word, phrase, or image that captures your attention:

“For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.”

*Habakkuk 2:2-3, NRSV*

Silence

As you read the text again, pay attention to what touches you or stirs a response within you.

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*Habakkuk 2:2-3, NRSV*

Silence

Reading the text again, is there an invitation for you in these words today? How might this text be speaking to your life?

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Silence

As the text is read a final time, simply rest into God’s presence. Receive these words deep within your heart.
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Silence

Journal:
- What moved within you during this time of prayer?
- What does it mean this Advent season to trust in a vision that does not lie?
- What is it that you hope will come? What are you waiting for?
- What is the world waiting for? Where does your deep hope and the world’s deep hope intersect?

Prayer Phrase: (Repeat this phrase, or another of your choosing, repetitively and intentionally within your heart.)

Hope is near.

Practice: Dwelling in Song- “Within Our Darkest Night”³ (Text: Taizé Community) You are invited to sing, listen to, or speak this hymn repetitively, allowing the words to sink into you, opening a space for reflection and prayer.

Journal: Imagine a flame within you that withstands everything that threatens to extinguish it. How is God kindling the fire within?

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³ “Within Our Darkest Night” available on itunes (Taizé Community Choir) or youtube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J88mvXqJH0g
A Surprising Hope

What are we waiting for? What do we hope will happen? We often stand in good company with biblical ancestors who imagined a holy rescue in the form of a mighty warrior or king, some grand salvation promise to save them from the present, oppressive realities. Instead of appearing in any of the grandiose ways imagined, Jesus was born in the midst of the details and realities that the majority of common people would have experienced. His life was an example of refusing the temptation to escape the present realities as he modeled what it meant to enter them more deeply.

We see this in desert temptations, radical forgiveness, and garden agonies. We see this in a meal shared and feet washed and even in the journey to the cross. We see this profoundly in a manger birth scene provoking us to seek hope in surprising ways. The word made flesh is actually among us, a part of us, with us, working in everything that already exists, releasing shalom potential right here and now.

Advent is a time to take inventory of our own expectations. How is God-with-us seeking to be hope where you are this Advent season?

Hope is more than wishful thinking
   Or a burst of consolation
      Or an “it’s ok”

It is more than meaning making
   Giving purpose for pain
      Or the exit route
   On the discomfort way

Hope is more than a happy explanation
   Or a metaphor
   Or mechanism for coping

Hope does not run away
It does not try to get out of what is
But it can be found there
   Always
Real hope is in the dark
   In the pit
   At the bottom
Where you never thought you’d be

Real hope doesn’t bring a bandage
   Or sympathy flowers
   Or turn on an artificial light

Real hope is gravity
   It draws you to where you are
   For what it is
And doesn’t rush toward resolution

Real hope isn’t away from here
   Or past this
   Or beyond the horizon
With the future we cannot yet see

Real hope is always where you are
   And it does not leave
It is not waiting in the place
   You think you ought to be

This surprising hope
   Present already
Where you least expect
   Waiting for you to see
That wherever you are
   It is being born
Advent’s Waiting Wisdom

“The path of love is sure, unhurried, and filled with mystery.”
Nan C. Merrill, Psalms for Praying

Each year we can expect a new arrival of ancient wisdom rubbing its sharp edges against the current modes of cultural complacency. This is the gift Advent has come to bring: a slowing, unfolding, waiting time that refuses to be rushed in the name of efficiency, convenience, or urgency.

In a world obsessed with outcomes and achievement, Advent comes to remind us of the process of formation which happens in the details of the long dark nights along the way. We have forgotten how to wait well for things worth waiting for. Everything seems to happen so instantaneously and when it doesn’t, it is deemed unworthy of our time and attention.

We glorify the immediate as a sign of great progress without pausing to ponder the cost to our souls. Advent is a slow time whose narrative reveals a God who moves through downward motion in an upward world. When people wanted a miraculous salvific event or a powerful king, they got a human infant whose blood and flesh body grew at the same biological rates of everyone around him in the poor, Judean countryside. And this was God. And this is God still. This says something significant to us about the way the holy confronts our expectations of what has value and what does not.

Advent reminds us to pause long enough to consider what all this “progress” is for. I enjoy modern conveniences as much as the next person, but I am beginning to pay closer attention to the habits I am forming and how they are forming me… like reaching for my phone in any moment of unoccupied time. I am wondering about the space that is being lost for the human heart simply to wander, to dream and discover, without the constant lure of a flashing screen. What ideas are never given time to rise to the surface of the soul? What inner transformation prompting outward healing action is being subdued in constant mind-numbing immediacy?

There are mountains of spiritual wisdom reminding us that what threatens us as lack of “productivity” can also mean prayerful solitude. We are reminded that waiting for a thing is good for the soul… that some untapped source of strength builds up in us all along the way to the thing for which we wait. We are
reminded that there are things worth our lives that we cannot control and cannot hurry up no matter how hard we try. We can learn from natural rhythms of seeds in the ground and seeds in the womb that form in the time needed for life to flourish anew.

Advent comes to offer relief from the fast-paced and frenetic that fragments our lives and wears out our souls. Advent promises to reveal, if we are patient enough to endure the waiting, a holy depth and substance to life that cannot be manufactured. It is this fullness of time beyond our grasping to control it that humbles us into the place where we can receive the God who is doing, always, a new thing in and through us.

This Advent, we are invited to embrace the inefficient, inconvenient, downward way of God. Take time to risk stilling your soul out of its addictions to busyness and distraction. Resist the urgent “next thing” beckoning so that you may be present long enough to hear the voice of the holy speaking to your heart about your place in the promise of peace. Pay attention to the Spirit revealing in the least expected places, in its own time, the path to renewal you seek.

**Journal:**
- What does it look like to make space for God this Advent season?
- What keeps you from being fully present?
- What is worth the waiting?

**For Further Reflection:** “Trust In the Slow Work of God” by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/8078/prayer-of-theilhard-de-chardin)
When Keeping Hope is Hard...

Romans 8:18-27, NRSV

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

26 Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. 27 And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

Praying in the Dark

God, my prayer feels restless, wordless, an aching groan arising from my depths. May your Spirit hear the words my heart doesn’t know how to say. Interpret these longings before I even know what they are, or mean, or may require. Sometimes the night I am in feels so dark I have forgotten the possibility of dawn. I reach out blindly, walking slowly to feel the un-visible contours of the terrain beneath me, pulse quickening.

My prayer feels desperate, primal. Where are you, God? Be here! Show up! Act in me! Help me see! I need you! Be real, be real, please be real. Why, God who surrounds and sustains and is each life-breath, why do you feel so far away?

And the divine love voice in patient persistent presence whispers in response, “Trust what is taking shape in you beyond what you can see. Open your eyes wider in the darkness to let your sight adjust. Seek me in all things by the light that is within.”

Amen.

Journal: What is your deepest, aching hope? How does the Spirit sustain you when keeping hope is hard?
WAITING WITH COURAGE
Practice: Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is a form of praying with scripture. Breathe deeply and become aware of the presence of God. Enter into the text and allow yourself to be immersed in this living invitation for your life today.

As you read this text, listen within for a word, phrase, or image that captures your attention:

“Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!” Psalm 27: 14, NRSV

Silence

As you read the text again, pay attention to what touches you or stirs a response within you.

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Silence
Practice: Dwelling in Song - “Wait for the Lord” Community of Christ Sings #399† You are invited to sing, listen to, or speak this hymn repetitively, allowing the words to sink into you, opening a space for reflection and prayer.

An Advent Blessing

In barren times, promise of life beneath what we can see
In waiting times, a patient courage clinging to hope
In uncertain times, a deep trust in the goodness of what will be
In expectant times, the willingness to be surprised by the unexpected
In slow times, the wisdom to find peace in what is unresolved
In dark times, a soul aflame that is light enough
In every time, the gift of sight to see the Holy
    Even here
    Even now
    And always coming

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† “Wait for the Lord” available on itunes (Album: “In God Alone: Songs of Taizé”) or youtube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7GexIVX8HU