

December 15, Advent 3A (Matthew 11:2-11; Psalm 146:5-10; James 5:7-10)

## **In his response to John, Jesus speaks of hope in the present tense.**

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [December 4, 2019](#) issue

Hope and despair dance cheek to cheek around me often. I work with people who have been harmed by trauma from various sources, and recent months have been intense.

When I begin to feel despair close by, I know the recommended practice is to find reasons for joy and gratitude, however small and temporary. I've led workshops on caring for oneself while caring for others. I read and reread books on preventing burnout and recognizing the effects of exposure to trauma.

Lately, if I'm honest, it's not enough. God will bring the fullness of justice someday, yes. God is with us today, yes. But I confess that my hope begins to flag when gun violence continues despite grassroots prevention efforts, when members of my church are deported despite our protests, when the proposal to build a new ICE detention center is defeated in one town only to be accepted in another.

I grew up in Washington, D.C., and on a recent visit to my hometown I pondered the assigned readings for this Sunday while walking around Capitol Hill. My parents and my church raised me to be part of social justice movements from the time I was in the womb. These days familiar sights such as the Capitol, congressional office buildings, and the Supreme Court Building evoke discouragement.

A few hundred feet behind the courthouse sits the Lutheran Church of the Reformation. I worked in its building in my early twenties as an intern for an organization advocating for global economic justice. The church's sign out front cited Psalm 146, verses 3 and 5: "Put not your trust in rulers, in mortals in whom there is no help. Happy are they who have God for their help."

It's no surprise that when I put my trust in the people who work in the US government buildings nearby, it leads to despair. But that's not the whole story. I

have been feeling a lack of hope because I've also been trusting myself, a human who is involved in activist efforts. I want so badly to see my efforts pay off. Instead it seems like any victories we see are only reversed later.

This is nothing new, of course. People do better; people do worse. Sometimes the people with the most power are merciful and just, other times capricious and tyrannical.

John the Baptist sits in prison for challenging one of those rulers. Yet Jesus does not speak only of future justice in his response to John. He speaks in the present tense when he instructs John's disciples: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." What does it mean to John to hear this response as he sits behind bars, wondering whether—or when—he will be executed?

I wonder if John thought of the Psalms as he sat in prison. Perhaps he remembered the words of Psalm 146 describing the character of God, "who executes justice for the oppressed . . . but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin." What kind of hope might it have brought John to remember the promise that God sets the prisoners free?

All around me I see people who seem to have given up, who seek only to get theirs in an unjust society. Young men sell drugs on street corners and shoot each other over turf. Real estate developers seek maximum profit and nothing else. Corrupt and complacent politicians continue patterns of disinvestment that perpetuate the conditions for violence. I wonder when exactly the way of the wicked is brought to ruin.

The original audience of the epistle of James may have had similar questions. The fact that the verses just before this week's reading deal with wage theft—one of the greatest present-day injustices paid the least attention—makes me think perhaps they did. Workers are exploited while "rich people . . . have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure." An organization I know in Chicago confronts restaurants that steal the wages of workers such as those who wash dishes. The people who have the grimmest, sweatiest jobs in the back of the restaurant are regularly robbed of their pay while in the front the wealthy dine in luxury and in pleasure.

Then in our reading, the letter encourages listeners to be patient and to strengthen their hearts for the coming of the Lord. Patience and strength can be a tall order.

Each year we repeat Advent rituals. We sing the hymns and recite the familiar verses. Time overlaps, the present and future tenses proclaiming God's transformation even as we still long for it. What would it look like to really let Advent proclamations seep into our weariest places, where despair creeps in and threatens to take hold? How might we find hope when our activist efforts seem to fail—not just hope for someday but hope for now?

Maybe hope is as basic as refusing to give up and sell out. Hope is continuing to be God's hands and feet in the world, even when the odds are against us. Hope is openness to transformation, listening and looking for signs of God's action happening all around us, just like Jesus told John's disciples to tell John. Hope is trust in the character of our God as one who brings justice to the oppressed, not just tomorrow but today.

Hope is knowing that God acts in human history for liberation and restoration. We only need the eyes to see it and the ears to hear it.