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**Advent Sunday 2020
Hope**

Dear Friends

We've reached the season of Advent, a special time of preparation for Christmas. Throughout this unusual year, we've all probably tried to make preparations of one sort or another at various times – for birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, meetings with friends and families – but, if you're anything like me, the uncertainty of the year has scuppered most of these.

We're not used to uncertainty; we don't like it. If the weather forecast predicts sun and we get rain, we're annoyed. If the internet cuts out on a zoom meeting, we (I!) get stressed, as I do with most forms of technology. We like to know what's happening, to being in control, to making firm plans.

However, for most of human history people had to live with uncertainty. Many of the Bible readings we hear during Advent remind us of this. These Advent readings from the Old Testament were written by prophets who lived hundreds of years before Jesus, in times of great instability caused by war, injustice, famine and disease.

In these ancient times many people became overwhelmed with worry and fear. People weren't even certain that God was there! Even then, for the prophets who lived in those times, their faith in God provided stability and hope.

The prophets listened for God's voice and looked for evidence of God's presence around them. When they heard God speak of his love for the world and all its people, the prophets became messengers to guide and console others. They reminded people that, although God may not prevent disasters, he will never fail to see us through them. We just have to stay faithful and follow God's example. In a famous Advent reading, the prophet Isaiah explains what this would look like in his prediction of a saviour sent by God to lead us:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots; on him the spirit of the Lord rests, a spirit of wisdom and perception, a spirit of understanding and authority, a spirit of knowledge and reverence. He does not judge by appearances or gossip; he will judge the poor fairly and defend the rights of the helpless. Isaiah 11:1-4

For Isaiah, the shoot he chose to give attention to, signified the birth of Jesus – the stump of Jesse

referring to the ancient family from which Jesus was descended. This birth fulfilled a promise God made long ago – that whatever was going on in our lives, God would never abandon or leave us. That we are loved so much by God that he wants to be close to us, to be one of us, to work alongside us to build a better future.

Regardless of the uncertainties of the present time, a better future is something we can all prepare for. So, between now and Christmas, look out for signs of God's constant presence in our lives and our world – in nature, in the smile of a child, in the kindness of strangers. Listen for God's voice in the words of a friend, the lyrics of a song, in scripture or prayer. Then communicate the hope – believe that each of us can make a difference!

An Advent prayer:

God of hope, who brought love into this world, be the love that dwells between us.

God of hope, who brought peace into the world, be the peace that dwells between us

God of hope, who brought joy into this world, be the joy that dwells between us

God of hope, the rock we stand on, be the foundation of our lives.

(prayer courtesy of faithandworship.com)

With love, Gill

Come, thou long-expected Jesus
Born to set thy people free
From our fears and sins release us
Let us find our rest in thee

Israel's strength and consolation
Hope of all the earth thou art
Dear desire of ev'ry nation
Joy of ev'ry longing heart

Born thy people to deliver
Born a child and yet a king
Born to reign in us forever
Now thy gracious kingdom bring

By thine own eternal Spirit
Rule in all our hearts alone
By thine all-sufficient merit
Raise us to thy glorious throne

