



KEEPING WATCH

A Bread for the World Advent Devotional





TABLE OF CONTENTS

03 About Us

04 Join Us

05 **Week 1** | Keeping Watch: The Grace that Restores

07 **Week 2** | Keeping Watch in the Silent Night

09 **Week 3** | Keeping Watch: Reflecting the Light

11 **Week 4** | Here Am I, Keeping Watch

ABOUT US

At **Bread for the World**, our mission is to educate and equip people to advocate for policies and programs that can help end hunger. Our faith in Christ is the foundation of our efforts and compels us to love our neighbors near and far. There are more than 700 million people experiencing hunger around the world every day. Not only are people in need of food, but there's a global hunger for justice, equity, and security.

This is why our work is grounded
in the **hope** that Christ's
arrival brings and is inspired
by God's redemptive love.

JOIN US

As we prepare our hearts for the birth of the Christ child, we also anticipate Christ's return and the fulfillment of God's kingdom. How do we stand in the tension of what is and what is to come? **We keep watch.** This Advent season, we reflect on what it means to keep watch in this period of history while wrestling with questions about how to bear witness to the world we trust is coming, who and what it is that we are watching for, and how we might practice keeping watch.

Bishop James Walker reflects on grace that keeps us steady in the ups and downs and points us to God's promise to be faithful. **Rev. Eric Roemer** reflects on the practice of keeping watch in the silence, waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises. **Rev. Fatima Yakubu-Madus** reflects on the practice of watching for where God's light is already appearing. **Dr. Jeremy Everett** reflects on Mary's willingness to say "Here am I" and considers how we, too, can make ourselves available to God and to one another amid hunger and hardship.

This devotional is appropriate for both individuals and groups. It is structured with scripture that comes from the Revised Common Lectionary, a reflection, a prayer, and a prompt for deeper reflection and discussion. We invite readers to slow down and ground yourselves in your bodies. Let us take our time as we read.

Every person may engage with each devotional in different ways. In group settings, you might consider building in time for stillness in silence or with musical accompaniment, discussion of the question provided, and prayer with the text provided and/or prayer specifically for one another.

On behalf of Bread for the World staff, we wish you a meaningful and joy-filled Advent.



- Rev. Nancy Neal

Rev. Nancy Neal is the Minister for Spiritual Formation and Wellness at Bread for the World.

KEEPING WATCH: THE GRACE THAT RESTORES

Scripture

PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19,
MATTHEW 13:24-37

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us. Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

How long, Lord God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people? You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful. You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us. Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved. Restore us, Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

– Psalm 80:1-7, NIV

Reflection

Years ago, I purchased an old oak table with four ornate chairs, each adorned with a colorful sunflower. I refinished the set and removed every hint of those dreaded sunflowers. Years later, I learned my table was the sole survivor of six sets made in Kansas in 1906, just a few years after Kansas was officially named the Sunflower State. In removing the sunflowers, refinishing erased part of the table's original identity and purpose, that of honoring the sunflower state. Refinishing satisfied the moment, but my table, like Israel, was crying out for restoration! Advent reminds us that while refinishing satisfies the moment, restoration recovers purpose.

During this season of expectation, we observe the economic hardship caused by policies and budget cuts that threaten lifelines of health care, basic nutrition, and societal safety nets. Globally, the ultra-poor, who already teeter on the brink of disaster, are pushed even closer to nonexistence. The Advent season calls us to rehear Psalm 80 as a lament, not for personal failures and individual sin, but for our corporate lapses. This cry comes from the rotunda, not the kitchen table.

In Psalm 80, God's people recall their national story and God's role in it. Though woefully broken and painfully separated from God, the psalmist envisions the nation not as chaff fit only for the fire, but poetically as the perfect candidate for the revitalizing work of restorative grace.

Keeping Watch: The Grace That Reorients

Significantly, the prayer is not a request for divine guidance, but a request for God to reorient Israel. The cry of "Restore us," means "Cause us to turn," or "Turn us," — the request hints at the muting of our political/spiritual GPS. Similarly, research shows every dollar spent funding SNAP can generate substantially more than a dollar in economic activity. Yet, turned from reason, we see controversy. Hunger is pervasive, food insecurity is rising, 30 percent of the food we produce is disposed of as waste, and yet Congress resists Food Date-Label Reform. Restore us, O God. We require your "turning" that we may see your glory and make better choices.

KEEPING WATCH: THE GRACE THAT RESTORES



Keeping Watch: The Grace That Remains

Finally, in Psalm 80, the poet moves a people from lament to divine veneration. Deliberately, “O God” becomes “O God Almighty,” and eventually “O Lord God Almighty!” The poet departs from the traditional pattern wherein laments begin with peril but end in praise. The ending implies that the psalmist may have known that the northern kingdom had fallen, hence to end with praise would be nonsensical. It is also possible that the poet prophetically envisions a tragic end for the nation. Even so, the northern kingdom’s failure to accept restorative grace in no way diminishes the greatness of the God from whom it flows. Even if Israel perishes, God remains the Lord God Almighty.

Prayer

God of restorative grace, keep us awake to the suffering around us. Give us eyes to see those whom others overlook, courage to confront what diminishes human dignity, and willing hands to participate in your work of restoration. O God, O God Almighty, O Lord God Almighty, enable us to see you as the source of restorative grace as well as the opportunity for us to partner with you and to embody you in our efforts. Amen. your glory and make better choices.

Practice

This week, keep watch for one person, condition, or injustice in need of more than a temporary repair.

Ask: What would restoration look like, and what part can I play in it?

In what ways might our longing for restoration reveal deeper truths about our shared humanity?



Bishop James Walker serves as the secretary of Bread for the World’s Board of Directors. He is Presiding Bishop of the Seventh Episcopal District of the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church.

KEEPING WATCH IN THE SILENT NIGHT

Scripture

2 PETER 3:8-15A, MARK 1:1-8

But do not ignore this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like one day. The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish but all to come to repentance.

– 2 Peter 3:8-9, NRSVUE

Reflection

It was a silent night. There had been 400 years of silent nights since God last spoke to them through Malachi. It was a dark night; socially, politically, and spiritually dark. The people were waiting, weary, afraid, and grieving.

It was a silent night again, but it was also a holy night. Both of those things are true about the dark night of the soul. We have to hold all of this in both hands.

It is silent again for many. It is dark again for many. It is still holy, though, for those who are keeping watch.

They kept watch between the prophecy and the promise. Now, here we are, keeping watch between the promise of the incarnation and the return. We celebrate Advent by keeping watch on dark, silent, holy nights, remembering that we are not the first to wait weary, afraid, and grieving. We celebrate Advent by remembering that God has always been faithful to do what He has promised.

Peter tells us to keep watch in our waiting and celebrating because we can be certain of the coming of the new heavens and new earth, where righteousness dwells. We should be as certain of it as we are that the incarnate God, in whom all righteousness dwells, was laid in a manger.

What promise is this? It is that the world will be as it was intended to be, even though it is not yet. We wait in the certainty of this promise. We celebrate Advent to remember the certainty we can have; the certainty we should have.

Our Lord has not forgotten, and He is not delayed. He is patient for the sake of our salvation. His righteousness will come. The world will be holy. He will be our God, and we will be His people. Corruption will give way to justice. Deception will cease in truth. Violence will be defeated by peace. And the hungry will be filled. This is the righteousness of the Lord to come.

What do we do in the waiting? We keep watch. We prepare... like we would for a holiday guest. We clean the house, make the meal, and watch the windows to welcome them at the door. Peter says we are to

KEEPING WATCH IN THE SILENT NIGHT



make every effort to be spotless, blameless people of peace.

What does this mean? We prepare by living like the people of the world that is coming, not the world that is here. We live holy lives in the dark, silent nights. We do the righteous and holy work to prepare for what is not-quite-yet. We clean the house of our hearts. We make the meals for the hungry. We keep watch.

How are you preparing?

Prayer

Almighty, faithful Lord,
Let us find your joy as we keep watch,
Even in the dark, silent nights.
Make us people of your coming righteousness;
purity of heart and life,
generous at the table,
ready for your return.
All in Christ our Lord,
Amen.

Practice

Reflect on the question, how are you preparing in this season of Advent, for the coming of the Christ child?



The Rev. Eric Roemer serves as a board member of Bread for the World. He is the Lead Pastor of Greentown Wesleyan Church in Greentown, Indiana.

KEEPING WATCH: REFLECTING THE LIGHT

Scripture

1 THESSALONIANS 5:16-24,
JOHN 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

– John 1:6-8

Reflection

Advent begins in the darkness. We light candles because we know the darkness is real. The world we inhabit is not always the world we know God desires. We see hunger, poverty, homelessness, violence, displacement, and injustice. We see families struggling to put food on the table and communities bearing burdens they did not create. We see people whose voices are ignored and whose dignity is too often treated as conditional. Advent does not ask us to pretend these realities do not exist. Advent asks us to keep watch in the midst of them.

Keeping Watch for the Light

Before we move forward, it is worth pausing to look back. During the first two weeks of Advent, we were invited to slow down, to watch, to wait, and to make room for God's presence. Perhaps you entered Advent carrying hope. Perhaps you came carrying weariness, grief, uncertainty, or a deep concern for the world around you.

Where are you now?

Keeping watch is more than waiting, it is an active spiritual practice. We pay attention. We notice. We listen. We look for signs of God's presence and movement in the world.

John came as a witness to the light. And John understood something important: he was not the light. That may be one of the most freeing messages for us as people committed to ending injustice, hunger, and poverty. We cannot solve every problem, nor carry every burden. We cannot bring about God's kingdom by our own strength. But we can be witnesses to the light.

The world does not have to remain as it is. We live between the world as is and the world God promises. This is the tension of Advent.

We see hunger, but we believe in abundance.

We see injustice, but we believe in God's justice.

We see division, but we believe reconciliation is possible.

KEEPING WATCH: REFLECTING THE LIGHT



We see darkness, but we keep looking for the light. Advent does not invite us to choose between realism and hope. It teaches us to hold them together. We tell the truth about what is happening in the world without allowing what is to determine what we believe is possible. It means that we live now as people who believe God's promises are true.

Every time we advocate for policies that help people put food on the table, we bear witness to the light. Every time we welcome someone who has been pushed aside or stand with someone whose dignity has been denied, we bear witness to the light. We are not the light. But we can reflect it. And sometimes that is what keeping watch looks like: noticing where God is already at work and joining in.

Perhaps the question for this third week of Advent is not simply, what am I waiting for? Maybe it is: What am I watching for and where is God's light already appearing?

Prayer

Holy and gracious God, we come to you in this third week of Advent with gratitude for the light of Christ and with awareness of the darkness that still surrounds us. Help us notice where we have been and where you are leading us. Where we are weary, renew us and where we are discouraged, strengthen us. Where we have become numb to suffering, awaken us. Where we have lost hope, remind us of your promises. Give us courage to speak when silence would permit injustice. Amen.

Practice

Each day, notice one sign of hope: a person, conversation, act of generosity, policy change, community organizing, shared food, or kindness.



The Rev. Fatima Yakubu-Madus serves as a board member for Bread for the World. She is a deacon at Christ Church Cathedral in the diocese of Indianapolis.

HERE AM I, KEEPING WATCH

Scripture

LUKE 1:35–38

The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

– Luke 1:35–38 NRSVUE

Reflection

This fall, I traveled to South Texas to gather with people from across the Rio Grande Valley. Local government leaders, nonprofits, universities, farmers, ranchers, former migrant workers, and advocates for people experiencing hunger all came together to hear firsthand about the realities facing communities in the Valley.

What struck me most was not simply the hardship, though there was plenty of it. It was the willingness of people to come together, tell the truth about what they were seeing, and remain committed to one another in the face of problems that can seem overwhelming.

Farmers spoke about food rotting in their fields due to a lost workforce. Local leaders described families losing access to SNAP and the effects that those losses have on both household food security and the local economy. Again and again, I heard people asking not simply, "What is happening?" but, "What can we do together?"

As I thought about that gathering, I found myself returning to Mary's words: "Here am I."

Advent teaches us to wait, but Christian waiting is not passive. It is a posture of attention, a willingness to see what is happening around us, and to trust that God is present even when we cannot yet see how God's promises will be fulfilled.

And then she goes to Elizabeth.

Mary does not keep the promise to herself. She carries it into relationship. She finds another person who can recognize what God is doing and share in the wonder, uncertainty, and hope of what is unfolding.

I think that is part of what I witnessed in South Texas. Felipe Salinas, the longtime Bread for the World advocate, and those gathered with him were keeping watch. They were paying attention to the realities of hunger in their communities. They were listening to one another. They were telling difficult truths. They were encouraging one another to believe that a different future is possible.

HERE AM I, KEEPING WATCH



We are not the first people to wait for God's promises. We inherit the faith and unfinished work of those who have gone before us, and we do not have to carry that work alone.

The promise at the heart of Advent is not simply that God will someday make all things right. It is that God is with us.

In Jesus, God enters human life in the flesh. God comes close enough to hunger, thirst, suffering, celebrating, and love. God comes near, in so doing, we are invited to come near to one another.

Mary says, "Here am I."

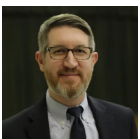
Perhaps that is our Advent prayer, too: Here am I, God. Here am I in the waiting. Here am I when the problems seem too great. Here am I, ready to listen, to come alongside, and to trust that your presence is already at work among us.

Prayer

God, as you are with us, help us be present to you. Meet us in our waiting. Give us eyes to see where you are already at work and courage to join you there. Remind us of those who have gone before us and teach us to walk faithfully with one another toward the world you have promised. When the work feels overwhelming, help us remember that we do not walk alone. Amen.

Practice

Who is God inviting you to listen to this Advent? What might it mean for you to say, "Here am I," and come alongside someone who is experiencing hunger, hardship, or uncertainty?



Dr. Jeremy Everett serves as chair of Bread for the World's board of directors. He is the founder and executive director of the Baylor Collaborative on Hunger and Poverty.

