

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts; *

show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

In the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit. amen.

I don't know if y'all have been to a grocery store in the past month. If you have, you might have noticed something Christmas is coming.

And I mean, the red and green, elf-themed, santa on your lawn with fan-powered reindeer, lights on every building kind of Christmas. The season Americans mark with Hallmark movies, expensive airline tickets, ads for diamond earrings, ugly sweater contests, and cookie exchanges.

The most wonderful time of the year! (as they say)

There's this running saying in the world of liturgical Christianity - those of us in denominations that follow church seasons - that the world has it wrong. Christmas starts the evening of December 24th! Don't break out the carols, it's still Advent!

And as an Advent defender myself, it's hard to argue. Advent is a beautiful and necessary time for contemplation and preparation. Our church calendar begins like creation began: in quiet darkness. Then a candle is lit. Another candle. And another. And more and more, until suddenly, BAM! Christmas! Joy to the World, we'll sing! A child is born!

Advent is like strapping in to a tall roller coaster, ticking up up up the chain lift. Something thrilling is about to happen, and in the meantime, I'm gonna get right with God.

That's what this season has been about. It's a season of longing: for justice, for love, for peace, for God. And so is the reindeer and santa season, too: our culture spends December longing for more. More cheer, happier family, better health, abundant food and gifts. That longing can often lead to anxiety, especially when the ideal doesn't match reality.

Nurses, first responders, and priests can all tell you first hand: the holiday season is particularly hard for a lot of people. It doesn't matter how big into Advent you are. This is a season of longing.

Take a moment to consider the past month of your life. What is your heartache? What are you longing for?

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That prayer from today's psalm is repeated three times. Three times. I thank God for that because it brought me up short this year.

This psalm has been prayed for thousands of years. Generations of God's people have asked for restoration. Think about that.

Imagine, if you could hear all at once every voice who has ever prayed this psalm. That's what God has heard.

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Restoration means healing. It means wholeness, holiness. And we can't get there on our own. Life is filled with broken things. We're human; often-times, we just aren't enough. We hurt each other, accidentally and on purpose. People sin against us, we sin against people, and people sin against one another on our behalf. Getting to a place of restoration involves repentance and forgiveness; but more than our actions, restoration takes the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes our pain is physical. We get sick, our bones break, and we struggle to heal. For many of us, the holidays are marked by the pain of grief: facing sicknesses that won't heal in this life. Distance from family

and loved ones. Mourning death. That's a deep, deep longing. Longing for restoration of life only God can raise up.

Take a moment to reflect in your own heart: what do you long for God to heal?

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Every kind of healing -- whether in relationships, in the soul, in the body -- all the healing we experience and work in the world is only possible through the power of God. Thousands of years ago, the psalmist prayed, and we pray it again today:

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Jesus is the answer to our prayer.

Jesus, son of God, is *eternally* begotten. That's Nicene Creed-ish for never beginning and never ending; for God who took all of his infinity and power and was born a human baby, to a human mother, in what we call the first century. He was born, we hear in today's gospel, to be Emmanuel - literally, "God-with-us." Not God watching from afar; not God waiting for us after we die; God-with-us *now*. God with us without beginning and without end.

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I find it so beautiful, because for thousands of years, countless voices have been praying these words. Longing for healing, life, justice, love. Every anxiety on our hearts is taken up in these words to the ear of God. We join this morning with an unimaginable chorus of people - and the profound thing, that takes my breath away?

God answered.

He came to restore the world; he was born in Bethlehem to show us his light, to save us from sin and death.

Now this is starting to sound like a Christmas sermon, so bear with me here.

Remember that while Christmas Day comes once a year, Christ always has been, and always will be, acting in your life. Advent included. Jesus isn't just the answer to your prayer; he's with you when you pray it.

Whatever pain is on your heart; whatever sickness needs healing.

Whatever anger you feel, or apathy, or grief, or nostalgia, or even joy.

Whatever you long for, Jesus is right there with you. It's this beautiful paradox of Advent: we can only prepare the way of the Lord with God's help. God who will never abandon you, no matter what.

So please pray with me, line three of the psalm in your bulletin.

And specifically, pray for whatever you feel needs restoration - in your soul, in your relationships, in the world.

Let us pray:

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Amen.