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As we begin this first Sunday of Advent, this season of waiting for the birth of a baby who brought hope to the world, we may find ourselves thinking, *I'm tired of waiting. How long do we have to keep hoping? That's all we've been doing for the past nine months—waiting, hoping, waiting, for life to return to normal. We've been waiting for singing in worship without a mask. We've been hoping for a smooth transition with our government leaders. We've been hoping for an end to racism. How long do we have to wait and hope?*

God's people have been waiting and hoping throughout history, and even with God's promise to get us through the tough times, we sometimes may feel weary as we wait.

I imagine Daniel also found himself tired of waiting, impatient for those in power to rule with integrity and justice. Written many centuries before Jesus was born, we hear the story of Daniel's deep sense of trust in God, even when sneaky government leaders tried to destroy him.

When I began preparing for this first Sunday in Advent, this reading from Daniel at first seemed out of place. Why read this familiar story about Daniel in the lion's den as we prepare for the birth of

Jesus? What could this story possibly say to us now when our minds are filled with concerns about shopping during a pandemic, about wondering whether we can plan any family gatherings, about wondering how we will celebrate Christmas Eve.

As I reflected on this story all week, I began to realize how this story of people in exile somehow still connects to our lives today.

Although Daniel was living in a foreign land, he caught the eye of King Darius, who promoted him into a leadership role. Some of the other advisors to the king were jealous of Daniel's success, so they devised a plot to destroy him. They knew that Daniel prayed to God on a regular basis, so they convinced the king to make a law that everyone should worship only the king. As punishment for those who broke the law, they would be fed to the lions.

I imagine the king realized his mistake as soon as the advisors brought to his attention that Daniel was breaking the decree he had just signed into law. "Your majesty, we hope you live forever. Didn't you just make a law that everyone should worship you? Well, we just caught Daniel red-handed—sitting by his window praying to God. You know what you must do, wonderful

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king, for you're the one who made such an awesome law."

There was no way the king could go against his own law, but before Daniel was fed to the lions, the king told him, "I hope the God you worship will rescue you." It's interesting that the story never tells us about Daniel's thoughts while being thrown into the pit, but we're told that the king tossed and turned all night long, worrying about the fate of Daniel in the lion's den.

Maybe the narrator focused on the king since many of us may more easily identify with the king's emotions than with Daniel. How many of you have tossed and turned over the past nine months? How often have we worried about a loved one who seemed to be in a lion's den, fearful of an illness waiting to bite them?

Waiting...that's the purpose of Advent, for this season before Christmas reminds us to be patient as we wait. The story also reminds us to hope, which may not always be easy to do. How many of you have wanted to hope that God could provide a solution but have grown weary of wearing masks and waiting?

While shopping this weekend, a store clerk stopped a woman in front of me who was not wearing a mask. I heard her lament, "I forgot to put it on. I'm so tired of wearing this thing. Does it really do any good anyway?"

I blurted out in frustration, "Just wear it. It saves lives," to which she replied with a voice of exasperation and sadness, "I know."

We have had a glimmer of hope in hearing that several vaccines have been approved and will soon be distributed. For many of us, however, that just means we will continue to wait.

While we wait, however, we may hear some express reluctance in getting a vaccination. It's hard to believe when so many voices try to snuff out any hope. It's hard to believe when we've waited so long, but one Jewish poet during the Holocaust left a message of hope scrawled on a wall, "I believe in the sun, even when the sun is not shining."

Those words continue to shine a light into our lives today, for

- I believe in health, even when the virus spreads at an alarming rate.
- I believe in equality, even when racism plagues our nation.

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- I believe in democracy, even when leaders try to tear it apart.
- I believe in music, even when we are not able to make music in the same way as before.
- I believe in Christmas, even when we may not be able to gather like we used to.

We can choose to look at the world with hope, or we can lament in despair, which is the choice two children faced as they were each invited to select a gift:

There were two rooms—one full of brand-new toys, the other full of hay and horse manure. Two children were taken into them, one a pessimist, the other an optimist. The pessimist looked at the first room and cried because all those wonderful toys would soon be broken. The optimist was in the other room shoveling, who said. “I know there has to be a pony in here somewhere.”<sup>1</sup>

As Daniel sat in the lion’s den, he could have thought, “Why am I here to be eaten alive? What

good has it done for me to worship God? I’m just gonna end up as supper for these lions.”

Or he might have believed, “God, I tried the best I could to follow your ways and worship you. I know the world is not perfect and bad things happen, but I somehow believe that you’re still here, even in this mess.”

You probably already know the end of the story: the next day, the king opened the pit and found Daniel alive, and in response, the king proclaimed, “I command everyone to worship Daniel’s God, who is a living God who lives forever and will never end. God rescues people and sets them free, for Daniel’s God rescued him from the power of the lions.”

As it turns out, the story of Daniel fits so well with this season of Advent, a season of waiting like no other one we’ve experienced. May Daniel’s trust inspire us to wait and hope, to believe even when the sun’s not shining, for even though our celebration will be different this year, the birth of Jesus will still happen. And that’s worth waiting for.

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<sup>1</sup> *Hodgin, Michael. 1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers.* Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #441.