



ONE

HEAR HOPE

ISAIAH 9:1A, 6; JOHN 1:14;
MATTHEW 28:20

Have you ever waited and waited and waited for something?

Perhaps it was for Christmas morning when you were a child, or to welcome a new baby, or to arrive at your destination after a long road trip. To pass the time, perhaps you sang songs or told stories. Perhaps you counted down the days, hours, minutes, or miles, celebrating with each passing marker. Waiting can be difficult, but it's made better when we do it with others. Throughout Scripture, we hear that, as we wait for God's promises to be fulfilled, we are not alone; God is with us.

Hope is waiting in faith. It's an active waiting; we wait with expectation, trusting that God will fulfill God's promises. After generations of waiting, the ancient Israelites' prophecies of the coming Messiah were fulfilled through the birth of Jesus—*Emmanuel*—which means “God is with us.” In the stories shared among the people of God, we hear the same message: God is with us, we are not alone. No matter how hard life is, no matter what we've done or left undone, no matter how lost we feel, we are not alone. Jesus is our hope. Jesus is here with us.

In this session, we'll hear the hopeful words that resound throughout Scripture and in Christ: you are not alone. We'll find this practice in the Bible and explore how Christian communities have heard hope and remembered they are not alone. We'll also practice hearing hope in our lives and communities.

INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE



Center yourself by closing your eyes and taking three deep breaths. Imagine the light of Christ surrounding the outline of your body. When you're ready, open your eyes and pray: *For you, O Lord, my soul in stillness waits; truly my hope is in you. Amen.*

What does hope sound like to you? Is it a soft whisper, a defiant shout, a song of resistance, or something else?

Who or what reminds you that you are not alone?

Where do you hear hope today?

In Spanish, the word *esperar* means both “to hope” and “to wait.” What is the connection between hope and waiting?

FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE

The people of God heard hope through the words of the prophets. Later, Christians heard how their hope was fulfilled through Jesus Christ. Where do you see hope in these texts from Isaiah, Matthew, and John?



HEARING HOPE IN SCRIPTURE

In the Hebrew Scriptures, we read about God’s people who face many hardships, such as unjust political leaders who exploit them, religious leaders who sell them out, and foreign armies who rape and plunder and kill. The people waited and waited, and waited more in expectant hope for the day of their salvation. They waited, not for a year or two, but from generation to generation. As they waited, they held tightly to God’s unfolding plan of redemption spoken through the prophets, such as Isaiah. Isaiah spoke of a day when there would be “no more gloom for those who were in distress” (Isaiah 9:1a), as he wrote, “For a child has been born to us, a son given to us.” This was not just any child that was to be born but one who would be called “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

While the people of God declared and dutifully taught this hopeful word from one generation to the next, they did not see signs manifesting the promised future. In fact, most of their days and years were clouded by trials and tribulation, long-suffering and lament. Yet they persisted in hope. They imagined the jubilee of that future day when their gloom would be lifted by this promised Prince of Peace. This future joy fueled their strength and renewed their hope through the weary years. They waited in hope for the coming of Immanuel.

Their hopeful waiting was fulfilled through the birth of Jesus—*Immanuel*—which means “God is with us” (Matthew 1:23). As it is written in the Gospel of John, “The Word [God] became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). In Jesus, God came near. God came into the world as one of us to live among us. Hundreds of years of waiting on the prophecies about the coming Messiah culminated in this moment that changed the story for all creation.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus reminded people they were not alone; for he—God, Immanuel—was with them. Jesus offered these reminders by sharing meals and breaking bread with them, by welcoming children when others wanted to push them away, and by proclaiming God’s kin-dom to anyone who was willing to listen. In the Gospel of Matthew, before ascending into heaven, Jesus invited his disciples to hear hope one more time. As Jesus told them, and tells us today, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b). Hear this hope: You are not alone.

“Kin-dom of God” is a term coined by Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, a *mujerista* (womanist) theologian. It rejects the presumption that God is male and the hierarchical connotations of the concept of *kingdom* in today’s power systems. As she writes, “The word *kin-dom* makes clear that when the fullness of God becomes a day-to-day reality in the world at large, we will all be sisters and brothers—kin to each other.”¹ The term is increasingly being used by Christians.

Throughout the Bible, we hear words of hope, reminding us that we are not alone. Circle any words, images, or phrases that help you to hear hope and remember that you are not alone.

The Word became flesh
and made his home among us.
We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father’s only son,
full of grace and truth.
—John 1:14 (CEB)

“And remember, I am with
you always, to the end of
the age.”
—Matthew 28:20b

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
[God] does not faint or grow weary;
[God’s] understanding is unsearchable.
[God] gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.

—Isaiah 40:28–31

1. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, *En la Lucha / In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), xi, n1.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. . . . Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

*Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,
And they will call him, Emmanuel.*

—Matthew 1:18, 22–23 (CEB)

I know the plans I have in mind for you, declares the LORD; they are plans for peace, not disaster, to give you a future filled with hope. When you call me and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. When you search for me, yes, search for me with all your heart, you will find me.

—Jeremiah 29:11–13 (CEB)

These texts, and many more, remind us we are not alone. God is with us. God is on the other end of that rope.

Rewrite Isaiah 40:28–31 or Jeremiah 29:11–13 in your own words as a tweet (280 characters or less). Share it on Facebook, Twitter, or another social media platform to let others know they are not alone.



FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Music plays an important role in helping Christians hear hope and remember we are not alone. When we sing together, the Spirit moves and we feel God’s presence with, in, and among us. We are renewed in our hope and strengthened in our endurance through melodies and lyrics that inspire, encourage, and comfort us. Historically and today, music has played an important role in helping Christians to hear hope and trust in God’s promises, especially in times of struggle.



HEARING HOPE THROUGH MUSIC

In the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, music played a crucial role in helping activists and communities hear hope and remember that God was with them. Fannie Lou Hamer, a civil rights leader, and others, often sang songs such as “This Little Light of Mine” and “We Shall Overcome.” These songs helped people to know they were not alone as they struggled for freedom and justice. Music sustained the civil rights movement and helped people to know that God was with them, even when they faced hatred and violence.

Music has also played a crucial role in other struggles for freedom. In the anti-apartheid movement, “Freedom Songs,” such as “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” (God Bless Africa), which was originally composed as a Christian hymn, served as songs of liberation and hope as people struggled for an end to apartheid.

Today, Christians continue to hear hope through music. In worship, we sing hymns and songs that remind us of God’s promises and presence with us. We sing songs to hear the hope that is proclaimed through the prophets, which has been fulfilled through Christ.


Photo credit: arindambanerjee / Shutterstock.com

- What songs or hymns give you hope?
- What songs help you remember that God is with you and you are not alone?


Find one of these songs on YouTube and listen to it. Notice how you feel while listening to or singing this song. Where do you hear hope?

Listen to these songs from the civil rights and anti-apartheid movements:

- “This Little Light of Mine” (bit.ly/FMThisLittleLight, 3:07)
- “Oh Freedom!” (bit.ly/FMOhFreedom, 3:04)
- “Nkosi Sikelel’ iAfrika” (God Bless Africa) (bit.ly/FMGodBlessAfrica, 6:53)



➤ Where do you hear hope in these songs?
What else do you hear?



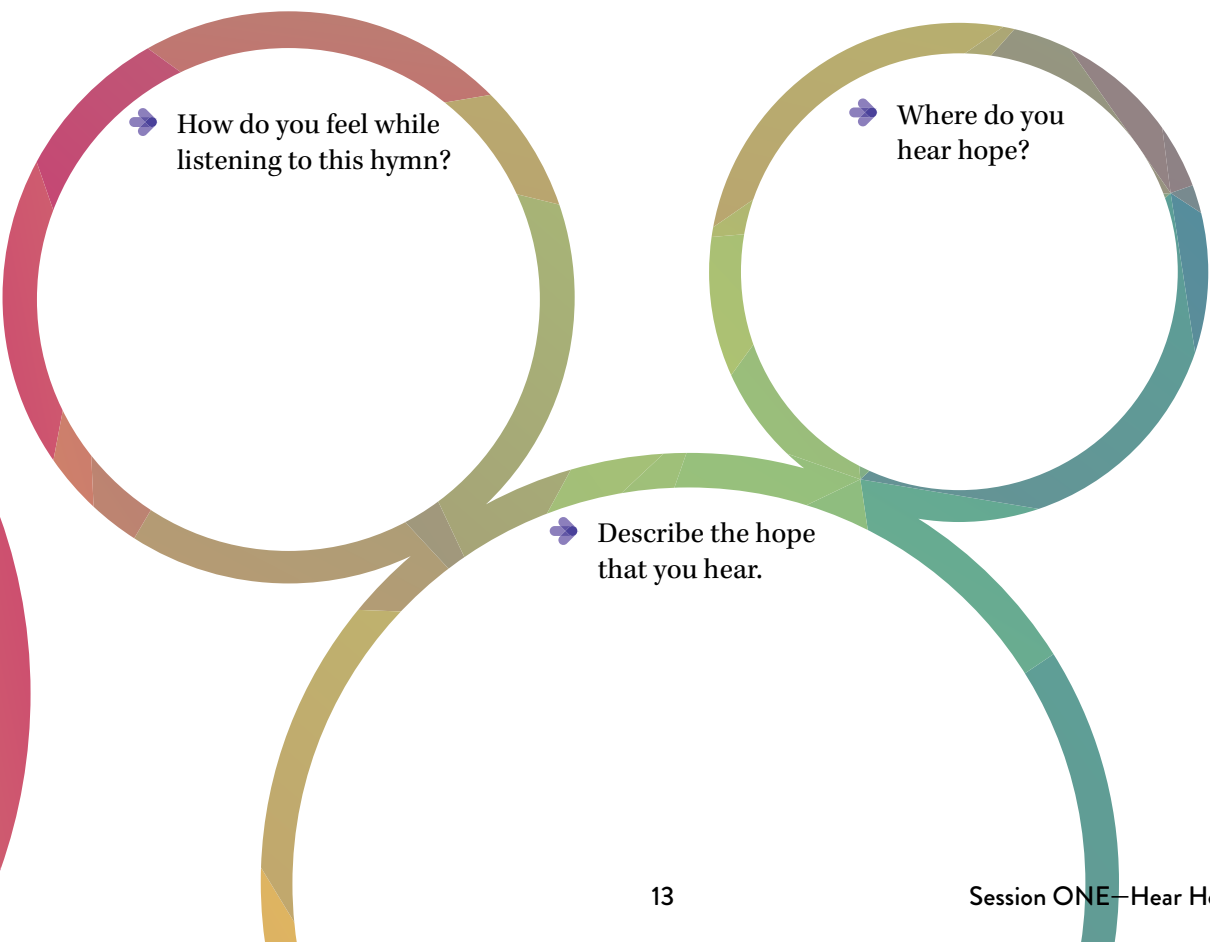
➤ Music plays an important role in movements for social change. How does music help people waiting and struggling for freedom to hear hope and hold onto God’s promises?

PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

We can hear hope all around us when we take time to tune our ears. We can practice hearing hope through music, reading Scripture, and reminding ourselves of God’s promises. We can help others to hear hope by writing encouraging notes, inviting a friend over for dinner, or sending a “thinking of you” text to remind others they are not alone. Caring actions can help people to hear hope when words fall short. Explore these practices and pick one or two to try this week. Notice which practices help you to hear hope and how you feel after engaging in them. After hearing hope in your own life, reach out to others to help them hear hope and remember they are not alone.

LISTEN

During Advent, churches sing songs such as “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (*GtG*, #88) and “For You, O Lord, My Soul in Stillness Waits” (*GtG*, #89), which speak of both waiting with hope and trusting in God’s promises. Listen to “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” (bit.ly/FMOCome, 3:45).



➔ How do you feel while listening to this hymn?

➔ Where do you hear hope?

➔ Describe the hope that you hear.

“Great Is Thy Faithfulness” (*GtG*, #39) speaks of God’s faithful presence that gives “strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow.” Listen to the hymn (bit.ly/FMGreat, 6:16) and think about a time when you felt God’s faithful presence.

➤ How has God provided and cared for you in the past?

➤ How does this give you hope for tomorrow?

Write a message to someone in your family, church, or community who might be feeling lonely or hopeless. Let them hear that they’re not alone. Remind them that God is with them. As an alternative, write a message to yourself to remind you that God is with you.

Make a list of ways in which you can let others know they are not alone. Pick one or two ideas to do this week.

Post a song on social media that helps you to hear hope and remember that you are not alone. Write about what you hope others will hear in this song.

FOLLOWING JESUS

We have explored how we hear hope through Jesus—*Immanuel*—which means “God with us.” The people of Israel waited for many years for their hope to be fulfilled. Through Jesus, God drew near to the world to let people know they were not alone. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues to be present with us today. Music is one of the ways in which we, as Christians, hear hope. Music, especially singing songs together, has been, and continues to be, a powerful way of experiencing God’s presence with us, especially as we wait and struggle for all to be made well. As Christians, we practice hearing hope through listening to music and by reading and sharing Scripture; these actions remind us that God is with us and we are not alone.

In this world that is so often filled with the noise of heartache and despair, take time to hear hope. Hear God’s message to you: you are not alone. Continue hearing this message by going back to the Scripture passages on pages 9 and 10. Pick a passage that gives you hope. Write it on a piece of paper and hang it on your bathroom mirror. Read it aloud each morning. Hear Jesus. Hear hope. Remember you are not alone.



Hear Jesus.



Hear hope.



Remember you are not alone.