While your congregation may observe it at any time, United Methodist Student Day is traditionally celebrated on the last Sunday of November. In 2020, the date coincides with the First Sunday in Advent. This sermon starter is based on the lectionary readings for Nov. 29, 2020, and can be adapted for any Sunday and to fit your context.

The liturgy, offering talk and children’s message are designed to work together with the sermon or may stand alone to celebrate United Methodist Student Day in your congregation. Find these resources in the UMSD pastor and leader’s kit.

Stay Alert to Signs of Hope

*Based on: Isaiah 64:1-9, 1 Corinthians 1:3-9, Mark 13:24-37 (CEB)*

This week, after the Thanksgiving festivities, it often feels as though the world has pivoted quickly into Christmas mode. Neighbors are deck the halls, we are beginning to hear Christmas music, and some are eagerly engaged in watching favorite Christmas movies.

In the Christian church calendar, however, our first few weeks of Advent reflect a different tone. The Scripture readings express a feeling of loss and separation from God, combined with a deep longing.

The season begins, not as a preparation for the innocent, vulnerable baby Jesus, but for the earthshaking in-breaking of Jesus coming in glory. It’s a season of tension between God’s judgment and God’s promise. It’s a time of acknowledgement that the brokenness in the world cannot be fixed by trying to fill our emptiness with superficial cheer.

Perhaps, this year especially, that is a fitting practice. As we heal from the global pandemic,
we are in a time of preparation, watching and waiting with expectation that something new is about to happen. And that uncertainty takes us outside of our comfort zone.

Mark writes, “In those days, after the suffering of that time, the sun will become dark, and the moon won’t give its light. The stars will fall from the sky, and the planets and other heavenly bodies will be shaken.”

Perhaps you can relate to that Scripture passage, particularly in light of the events of this past year. The suffering is deep, depression has set in and, even when the sun is shining, everything has lost its brightness.

In our despair, we cannot perceive even a glimmer of hope. It feels as though even the stars are falling from the sky.

Today’s Gospel reading talks of this apocalyptic time. The word “apocalypse” means “revealing.” When the sufferings of the world seem as if they can’t get any worse and we are on the verge of all hope dying, Jesus tells us that the Human One is coming in the clouds with great power and splendor. In verse 29, we are reassured that Jesus is near, at the door.

The Gospel of Mark was written during a time of increased violence and poverty among the Jewish people. The reading from Isaiah also addresses brokenness and fear. As people return home after the Babylonian exile, tensions rise among the Israelites as cultures clash based on social status, political positions and religious authority. Rather than uniting, their differences keep them from coming together to resist the real threat to their existence. It is in this context that Isaiah asks God to tear open the heavens.

God, we need you! Come, shake things up. Help us become the people you created us to be! Move us out of our own way, our own prejudices, our own fears so that we can fully experience you.

The United Methodist Church has dedicated today as United Methodist Student Day. One of six churchwide Special Sundays with offerings, it is a time to honor and celebrate students in our congregation and around the world. We receive a special offering to invest in them as their spiritual gifts are revealed and they grow into strong leaders. We are mindful that they may be struggling financially, spiritually or emotionally. They are preparing themselves to face a world that, in many ways, is broken and hurting.
Together, we can support them by helping them prepare. Paul tells us in the first letter to the church in Corinth that we are called by God “to partner with God’s Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

On this first Sunday in Advent, as today’s apocalyptic Scriptures suggest, our hope is found in the unveiling of the good news that we don’t face the future alone. God is waiting patiently. We just might not be aware of the Divine Presence and power that is with us. While we may feel separate from God, our Creator has never left us. Through Jesus, we are called into partnership to build up God’s reign. One of the ways we do this is through our special offerings, joining together with other churches in the denomination as a sign of hope.

Isaiah reminds us that we are clay, and God is the potter. We find a strong and intimate connection between the potter and the clay. Together, we create something new and beautiful when we allow ourselves to be molded into God’s image. When we come together with our offering today, we contribute to the molding of students who are living out the calling God has placed on their lives.

As we participate in revealing the brokenness in the world, through our partnership with God, we become healers, justice seekers and peace builders even as we equip young people to carry the strength of their faith into their schools and professions.

The coming of Advent forces us to think about new possibilities. In surrendering, we find hope. It’s not in pretending or pushing through or spending lots of money on Christmas gifts. It’s in recognizing that even when we experience pain, God’s promises are waiting to be revealed.

Certainly, we will find joy in the festivities we have attached to this season, particularly as we reunite with family and friends. But in the midst of the busyness of the hustle and bustle, the true hope of this season is often found in the moments of quiet and stillness.

Hope is found as we prepare space in our hearts and in our home for Christ to arrive and be welcomed. May we stay alert to that promise.

Friends this is the good news. Jesus is coming. Soon and very soon, if we stay alert, we will be reconciled with this Divine Love. The Savior is coming to redeem us and to turn despair into hope. We only need to be prepared for his coming through our living and our loving. Oh come, oh come, Emmanuel.

Amen.