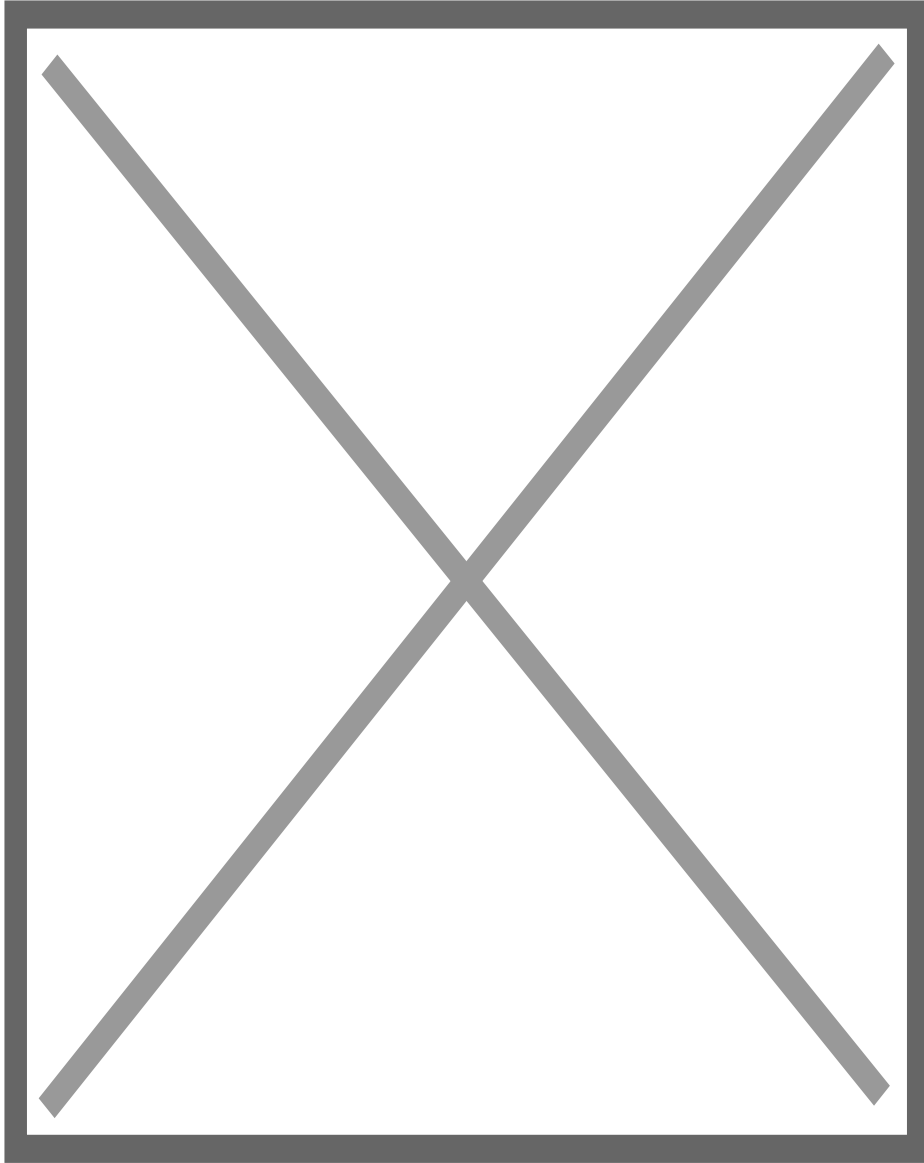


Hope arrives in the present tense

Living in the liturgical present makes salvation a story about us, not just the past.

by [Stephanie Saldaña](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue

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Century illustration

In Genesis 1, God speaks the world into being. It's not surprising, then, that language is tied to how we see God at work in our lives, that our faith is as much about the architecture of nouns and verbs as it is about prayer and worship and community. Yet I'd rarely given thought to the grammar of our faith, to how bound up language is in our ability to have hope during what feel like hopeless times, until recently. That is, until I had a spiritual

crisis, brought on by a verb tense.

I was writing about Christmas in Bethlehem, where I live with my family. I was describing our small Christian community, reeling after years of war. I ended with what I thought was a hopeful note: Christmas would still come, even if the war returned. "Bethlehem is the city where Jesus was born," I noted.

I asked my husband, who is both a priest and my most sensitive reader, if he would look at the text. When he reached the end, he asked: Had I considered writing the last sentence in the present tense?

Jesus is born. It's a small change, but hearing it rustled something within me. I became aware that I had fallen into despair over the years of war. I needed to examine the grammar of my faith, to meet God in the present tense again.

During Christmas mass, the use of the liturgical present means singing in the present tense. I grew up singing "Christ is born in Bethlehem"; the words "For unto us a child is born" are engraved in my heart as truth. I had never given it any thought. The liturgy is always about the present tense, with Christ truly present in the Eucharist as well as in the gathered body. During the liturgy we do not only remember; we participate. The eternal God speaks to us, the assembled, here and now.

Yet there's the danger of living in two tenses, one for Sundays and one for the rest of our lives. I didn't even notice when it happened to me. We were all too exhausted, worrying about our neighbors, our children, the very sky. Outside the church walls, I easily slipped into the past tense as one day blurred into another. I felt helpless, a bystander in history. Hope came in the present tense of the verb "to be."

God calls us back to the present tense. Yet staying here requires an openness to living the entirety of our lives liturgically, to seeing God present and available in the bread and dishes of the everyday. I'm slowly becoming aware of how much is at stake in daring to live the story of salvation in the present tense. It shifts the grammar of the questions we ask about our own lives, and so it also shifts something in us. It brings accountability. Instead of asking what I might have done had I been there when Jesus called the disciples, I ask: How is Christ calling me today? Instead of asking what I might have done had I seen Jesus paraded to his crucifixion, I must confront the question: Who are the crucified people of our times? Salvation is no longer a story about other people but one about us. It is a challenge in the face of the moral injury so many of us are currently experiencing, seemingly powerless in our proximity to violence. We have something to do, and it matters. I've been thinking about Simon of Cyrene, a bystander until he was pulled into the story of salvation, no longer watching Jesus but with Jesus. That's what it must look like to be called into the present tense.

Yet it's understandable that we slip into despair. Remaining present is communal work, and we are all entrusted with calling one another back to it. *Give us this day our daily bread.* A Jesuit friend told me that the image that helped him during the war was of the friends lowering their paralyzed companion through the roof to meet Jesus. We carry one another back to the here and now.

If we can hold onto it, this knowledge that God is truly present becomes the very ground of our being. When our neighbors are detained and war looms, it is knowing that God is alive with and in us, speaking to us in the present tense, that gives us strength. "In the truest sense of the word, God is a living God," wrote Martin Luther King Jr. in this magazine ("Pilgrimage to nonviolence," April 13, 1960). "In him there is feeling and will, responsive to the deepest yearnings of the human heart."

As we walk toward Easter, I'll look to my neighbors in Bethlehem to show me what is possible. On Good Friday in the Syriac Catholic rite, we hold a funeral procession. Jesus is taken down from the cross, placed in a casket, and perfumed with oils. The faithful become pallbearers. Maurice, who works in a stationary shop, his brother

Mourad, with his long commute every day, Emile, who suffers from health issues—for a moment they, too, are drawn into the story of salvation, entrusted with the sacred task of lifting the casket and solemnly carrying Jesus through the courtyard. We pass beneath it, touching it, remembering that we, too, die with Christ.

Then, on Easter, the bishop calls out: “Christ is risen!”

We respond: “Truly he is risen!”

Our joy can no longer be confined to church or to Sunday. Over the following days, the Christians of Bethlehem greet one another all over town by announcing the resurrection. Christ is risen, among laundry and war and bread and the grammar of our lives, here and now.