

grace



welcome



make yourself at home



**relax your tense shoulders;
shake out your tired arms;
rotate your stiff ankles**



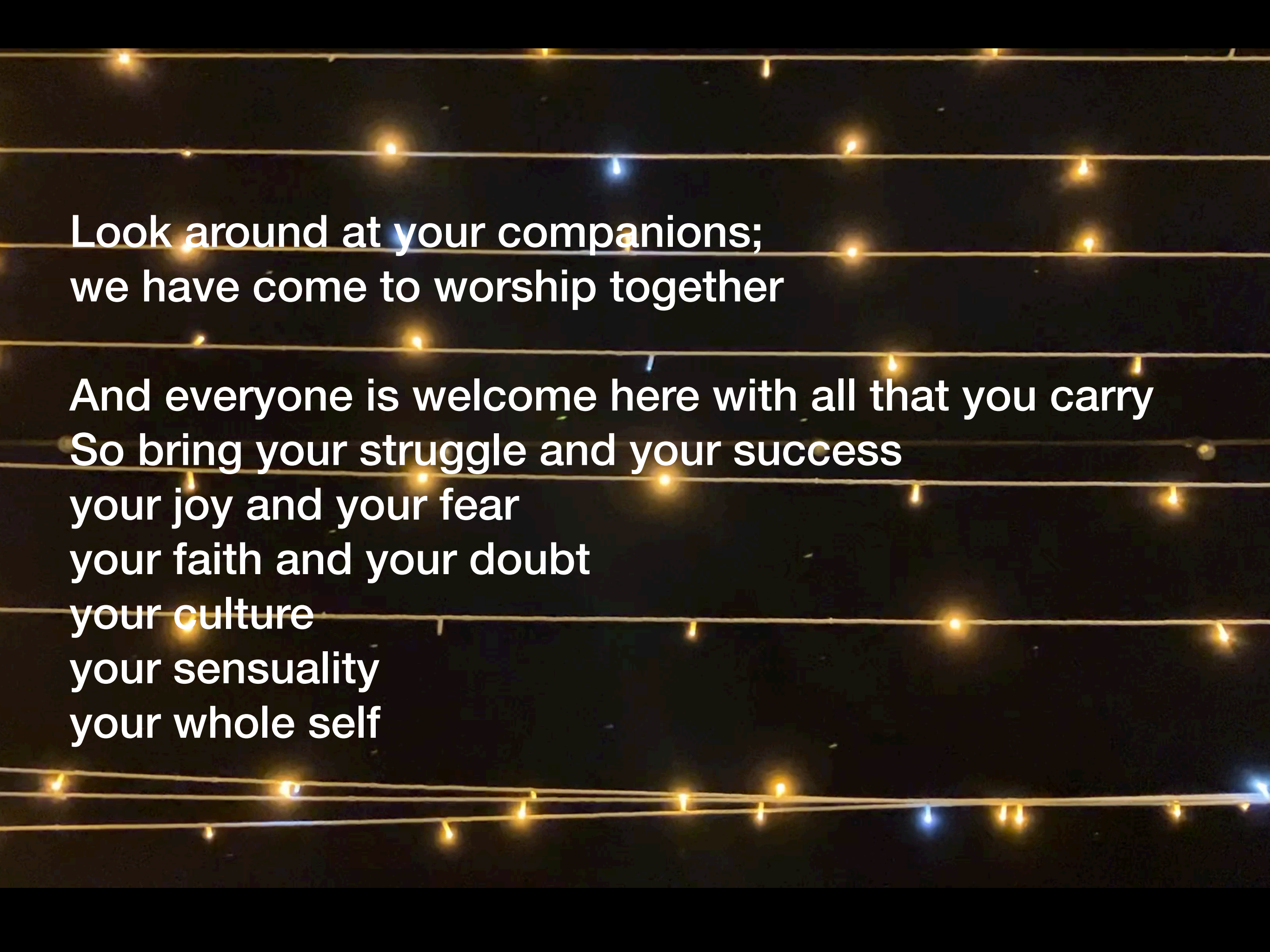
**breathe deeply;
breathe deeper still**



let your thoughts settle in this place

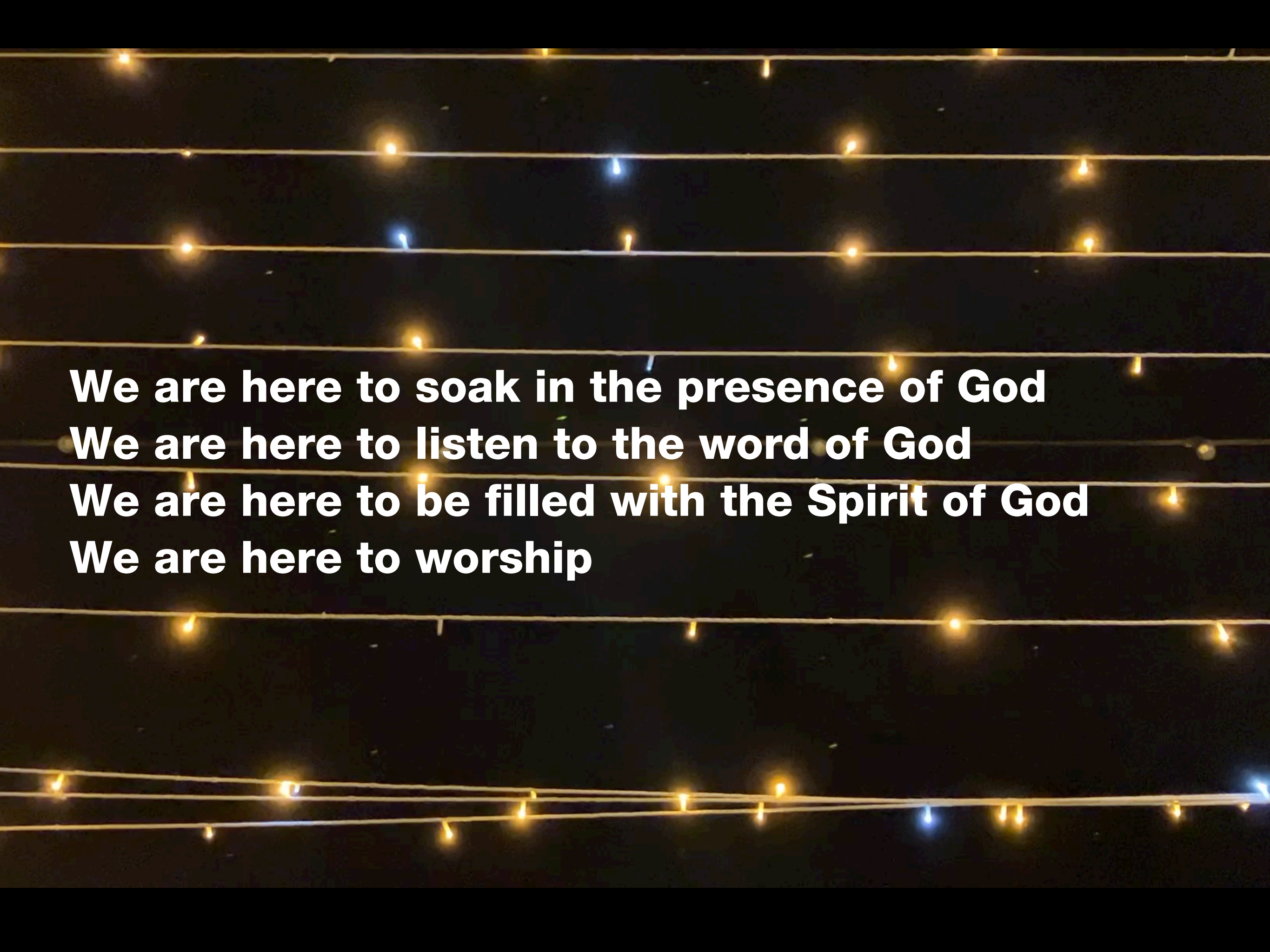


be fully present here



Look around at your companions;
we have come to worship together

And everyone is welcome here with all that you carry
So bring your struggle and your success
your joy and your fear
your faith and your doubt
your culture
your sensuality
your whole self



We are here to soak in the presence of God
We are here to listen to the word of God
We are here to be filled with the Spirit of God
We are here to worship

intro

Advent is a time of preparation for the coming of Christ at Christmas, and also for the second coming of Christ at the renewal of the heavens and earth.

Between the Old and New Testaments there are 400 years without word from God, while Israel waited for the promised Messiah to come. We could say that the first Advent lasted 400 years.

They have been called 'the silent years'. But they were not silent on earth. They were years of major world events, invasions and dictators, atrocities and refugees, turmoil and war. Not unlike our own times.

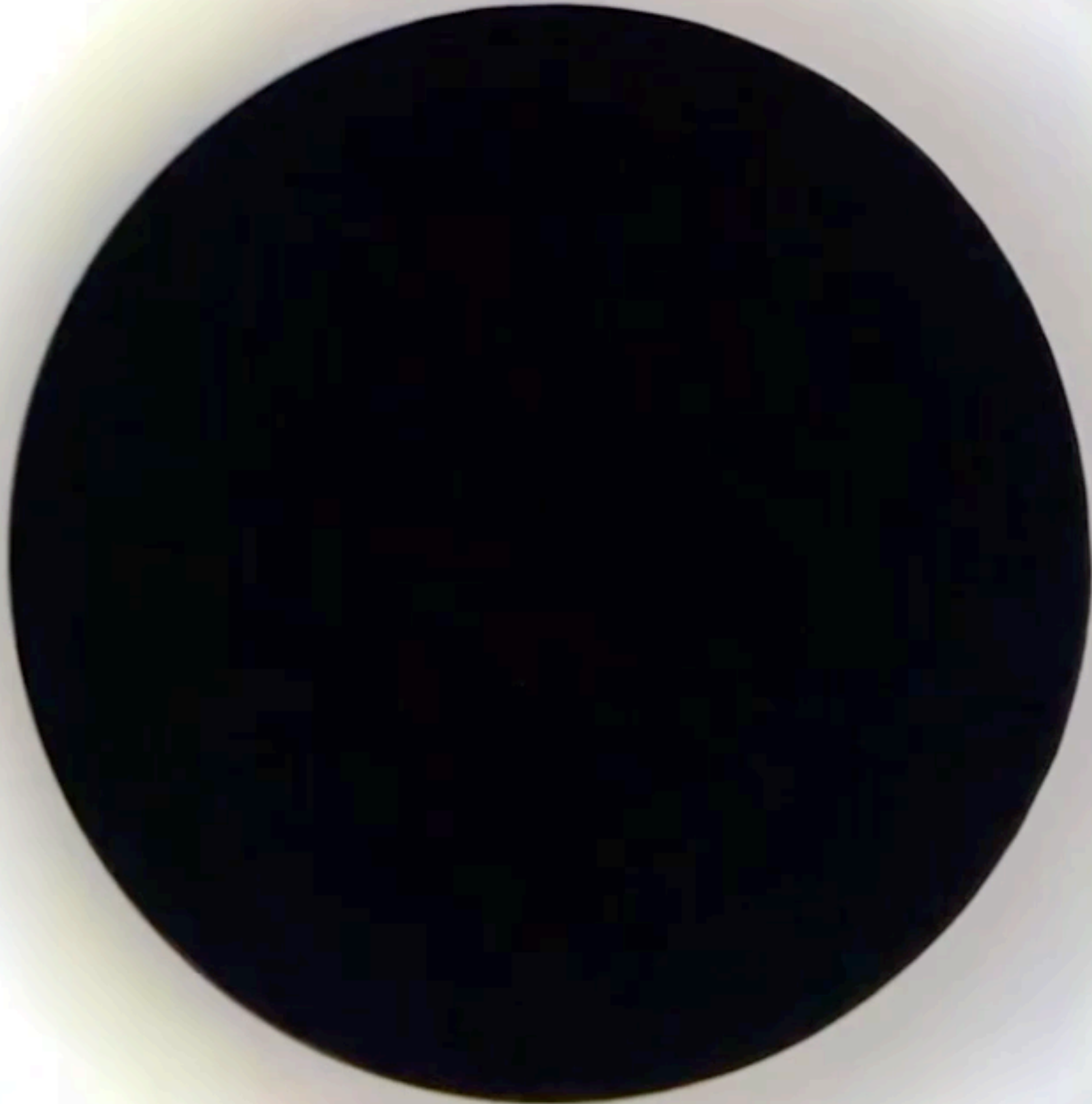
400 years is a long time. Imagine no word from God since 1620. What would the atheists say? How would we keep the candle of faith alight, in the storm of world events?

**When heaven is silent and earth is noisy,
how do we wait faithfully for hope to be fulfilled?**

silence

**prophecies of
hope**

Throughout the story of God's interactions with people in the Old Testament are glimpses of a different future, a redeemed creation, and a messiah who will make it happen...



**The people walking in
darkness have seen a
great light;**

**on those living in the
land of deep darkness
a light has dawned.**

**For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will
be on his shoulders.**

**And he will be called
Wonderful Counsellor,
Mighty God,
Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.**

**Of the increase of his
government and peace
there will be no end.**

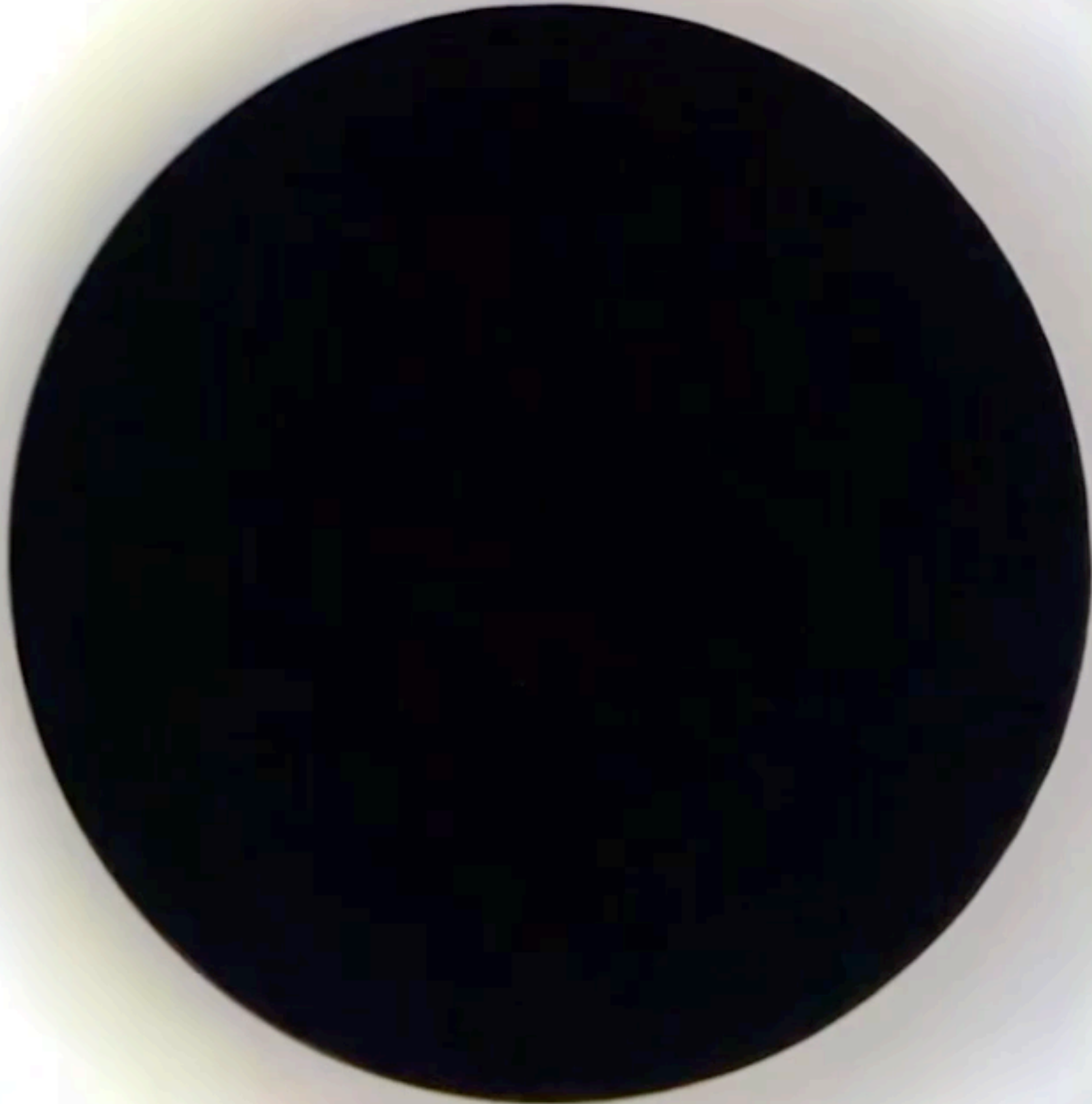
**He will reign on David's
throne and over his
kingdom,
establishing and
upholding it with justice
and righteousness from
that time on and
forever.**

**The zeal of the LORD
Almighty will
accomplish this.**

**You,
Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small
among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler
over Israel,
whose origins
are from of old,
from ancient times.**

For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I act, says the LORD Almighty.

See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.



but then. . .

no word
from god

for 400 years

of empires and
atrocities

In 333BC Alexander the Great conquered the Persian empire. He attacked first Tyre, then Gaza: after capturing the cities he killed all men of military age and sold all the women and children into slavery. Jerusalem was wiser: it opened its gates and welcomed him.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

When Alexander died, his generals divided his empire between themselves.

There was civil war for 40 years between the Greek generals, and between 319 and 302 BC, Jerusalem changed hands seven times.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

The Greek ruler Antiochus IV killed 40,000 Jews after a failed revolt, then sold another 40,000 into slavery.

Then he tried to outlaw the Jewish religion; banning the Sabbath, killing people who circumcised their children, banning temple or synagogue worship; when people met to worship secretly in caves, he burnt them alive. People were even afraid to admit to being a Jew.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

A rural priest and his sons, the Maccabees, rebelled. Judah Maccabee freed Jerusalem in 164 BC, and cleansed the Temple. He sought an alliance with the Republic of Rome, but was then defeated and killed by the Greeks.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

Judah's brothers, Jonathon and Simon, continued the guerilla warfare against the Greeks and the Hellenised Jews, and after several years of living in swamps and caves and launching raids on cities they won.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

They established the Hasmodian Kingdom of Judea, and after Jonathon's assassination, Simon reached an accommodation with the Greeks: leave us alone, and we will sit as a semi-autonomous part of your empire.

Then Simon was assassinated. The Greeks started having civil wars and forgot all about Judea.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

John Hyrcanus, son of Simon the Maccabee, hired mercenaries to conquer Samaria and Edom – places that had substantial Jewish populations who needed liberating.

But then, when he ‘liberated’ them... he forced conversion and circumcision on the Edomites, destroyed the Samaritan places of worship and enslaved the Greek settlers.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

John's son Jannaeus was a Saduccee, and when High Priest, he deliberately got one of the laws of Succot wrong – the crowd pelted him with lemons – it gave him an excuse to set the troops on them. 6000 were killed.

This led to a six-year civil war between the Pharisees and Saducees. The Pharisees lost. Jannaeus crucified 800 of the rebel leaders, having their wives and children's throats cut in front of them while they died – whilst he dined with his concubines.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

Rome saw a chance to expand, and established Herod – an Edomite – not even a ‘proper’ Jew – as a client-King. Herod married the last Maccabean princess... then had her brother drowned at a party. Then he killed her, then her mother, then three of his own sons.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

By 4BC, knowing he was dying, and fearing that no-one would mourn him, Herod ordered that when he died, a group of prominent Israelites would be murdered, so that at least there would be some people crying for someone.

but there was
no word of
prophecy in
this time

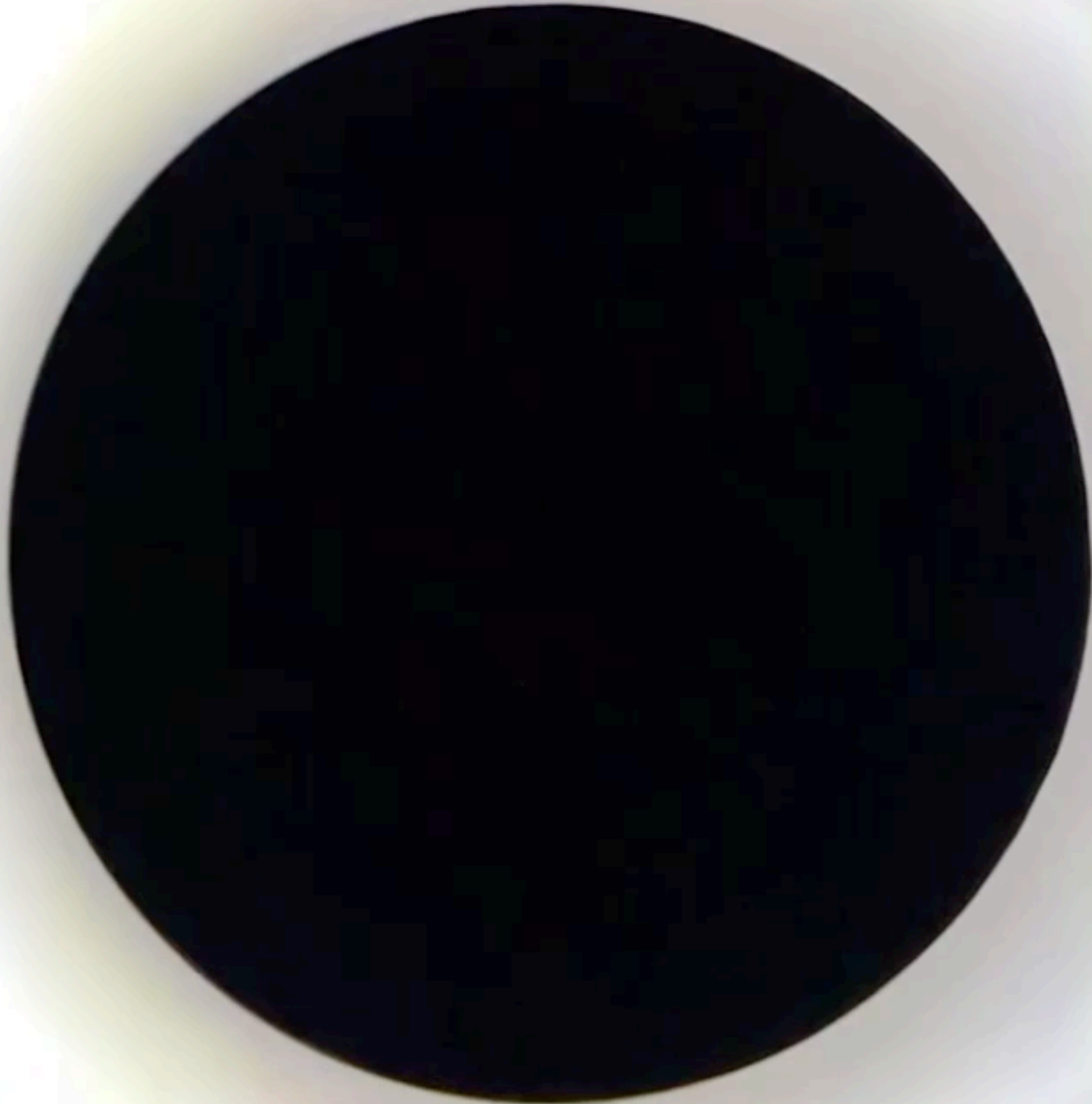
So, for the pillaged and beleaguered people who have seen all their hopes betrayed, and their leaders more interested in power than in their people – the question is:

How do you wait when heaven is silent?

How do you believe when hope has died?

always winter
but never
christmas

**and then the
silence was
broken**



Zechariah, do not be afraid; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you are to call him John. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God.

**And he will go on before
the Lord, in the spirit and
power of Elijah, to turn
the hearts of the parents
to their children and the
disobedient to the
wisdom of the righteous
—to make ready a
people prepared for the
Lord.**

Greetings, you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God.

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.

**My soul glorifies the
Lord and my spirit
rejoices in God my
Saviour, for he has been
mindful of the humble
state of his servant.
From now on all
generations will call me
blessed, for the Mighty
One has done great
things for me— holy is
his name.**

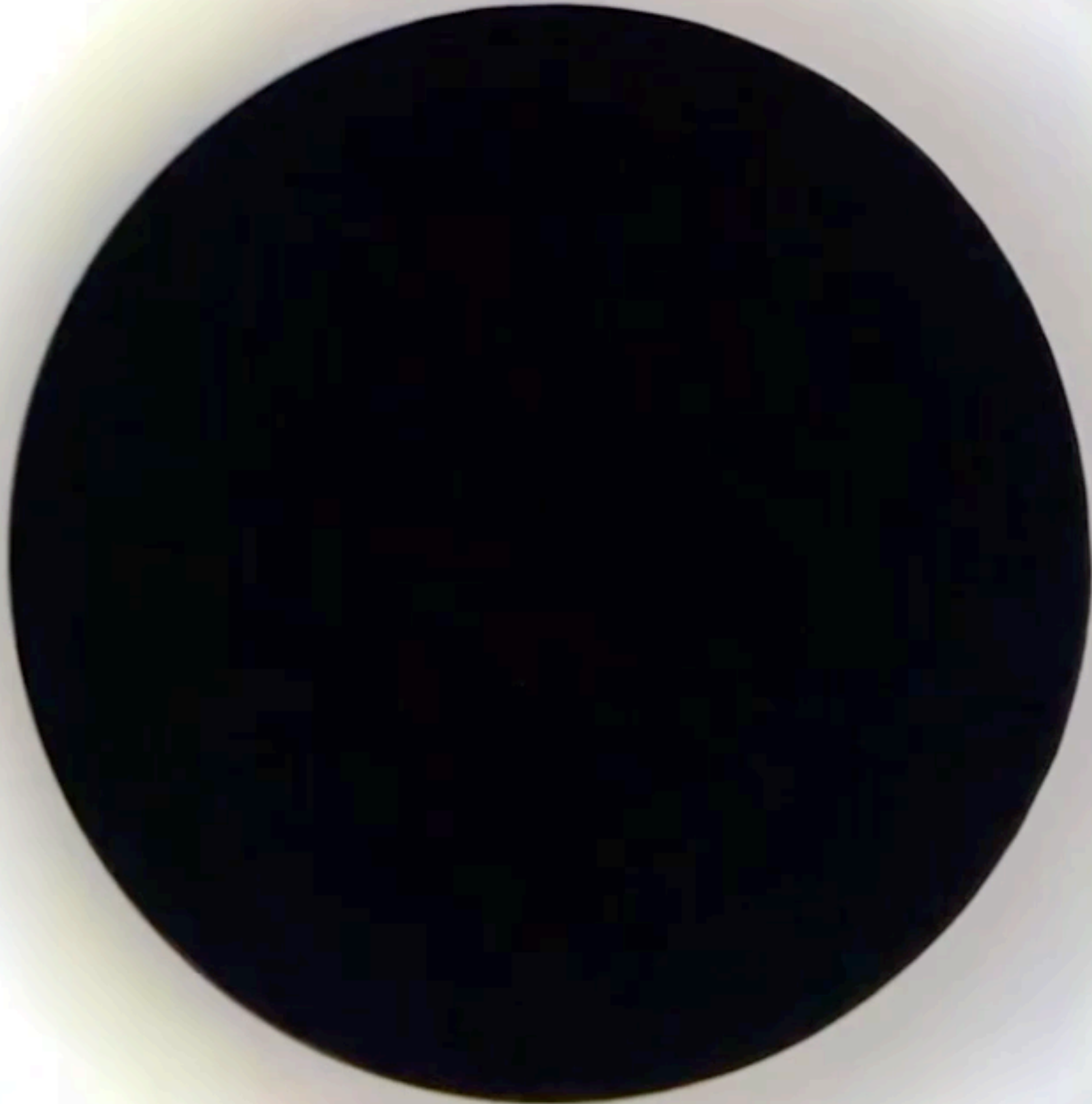
In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.

**The Spirit of the Lord
is on me,
because he has
anointed me
to proclaim good news
to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim
freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight
for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the
Lord's favour.**

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.

**And surely I am with you
always,
to the very end of the age.**



**what are we
waiting for?**



What are we waiting for now?

Jesus said

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

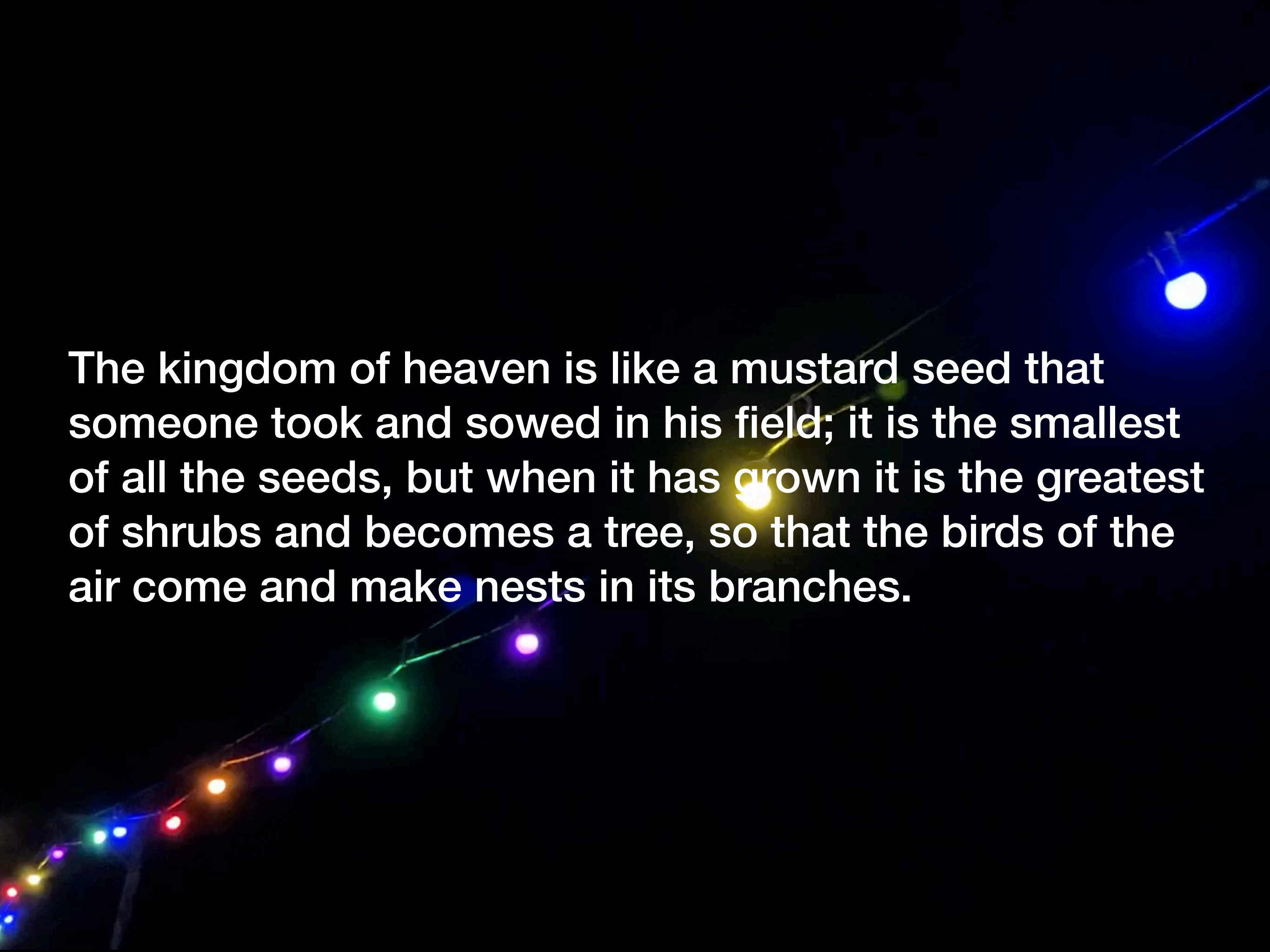
But in 2022 do we believe or feel or act
as if the kingdom of heaven is truly near?

Between the headlines and daily life –
where is the kingdom of heaven?

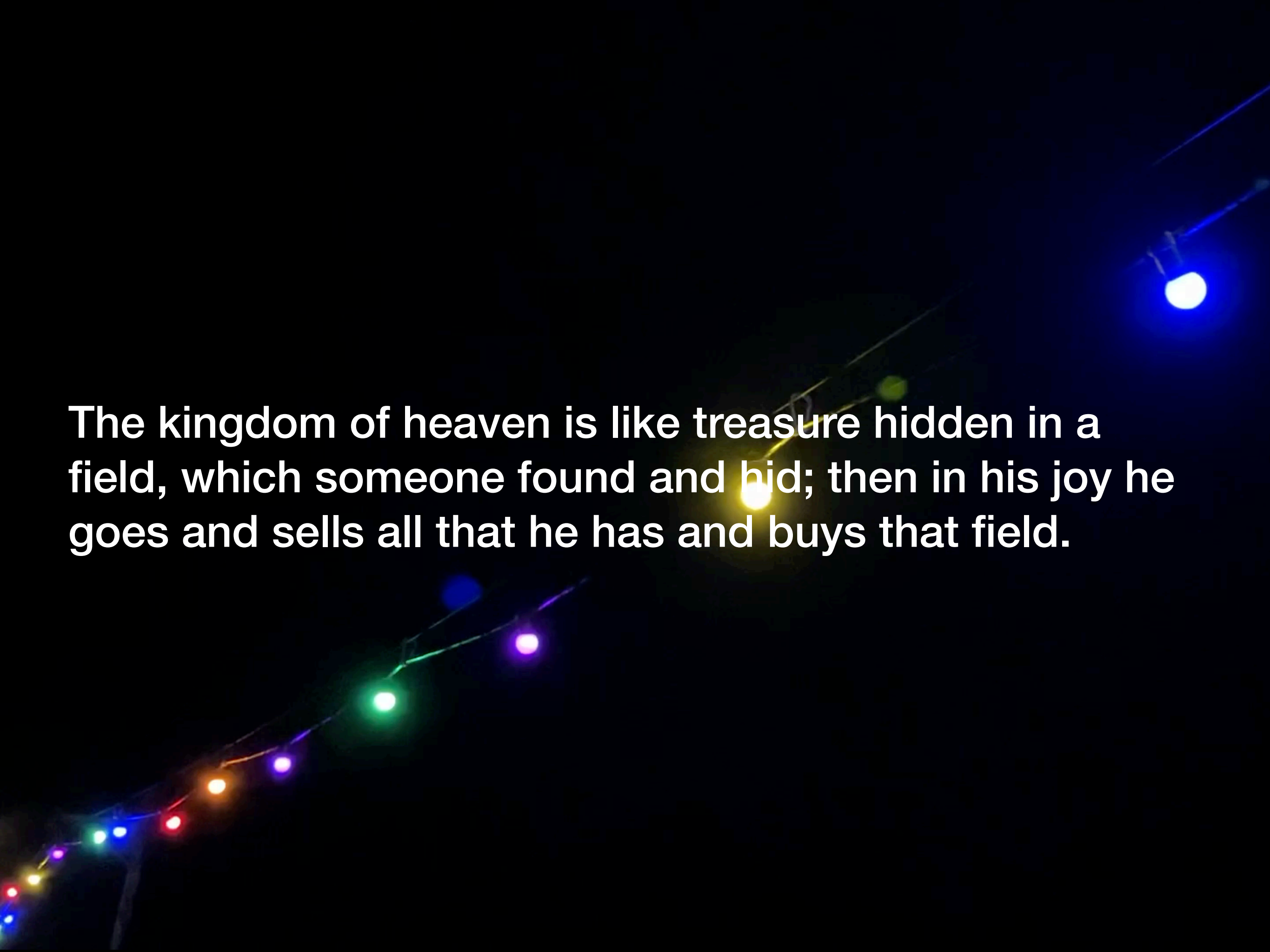
The kingdom of heaven is like someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. So when the plants came up and bore grain, the weeds appeared as well.

And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, "Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?" He answered, "An enemy has done this."

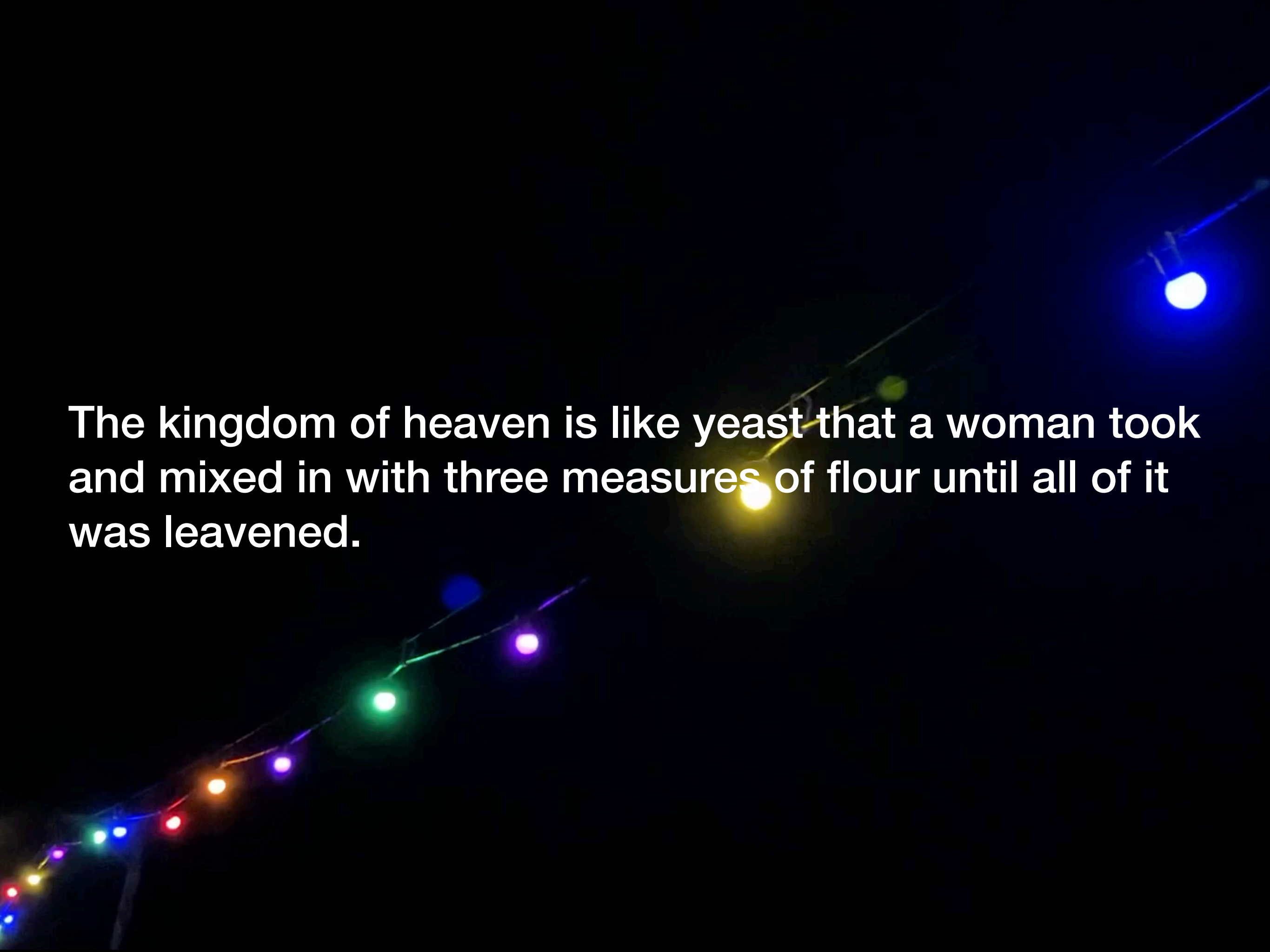
The slaves said to him, "Do you want us to remove them?" But he replied, "No; for in removing the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and then I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and tie them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn."

A string of colorful Christmas lights is visible against a dark night sky. The lights are in various colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. One prominent bright white light is visible in the upper right corner. The text is overlaid on the image.

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.

A dark night sky with colorful string lights in the foreground and background. The lights are in various colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The text is centered in the middle of the image.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.



The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.

A string of colorful Christmas lights is visible against a dark background. The lights are in various colors including red, yellow, green, blue, and purple. The string of lights runs diagonally across the frame from the bottom left towards the top right. A single bright white light is visible in the upper right corner, and another yellow light is visible in the center of the frame.

What is it that I am really waiting for?

How do I need to live now for hope of the kingdom of heaven to come near?

silence



A night sky filled with stars, with a dense cluster of stars forming a diagonal line across the center. The sky is dark, and the stars are bright and numerous. On the left side, there is a silhouette of a tree with dense foliage, illuminated from below, giving it a warm, golden-brown glow. The word "prayer" is written in a large, white, sans-serif font across the middle of the image.

prayer

we are all waiting, lord

**some of us are waiting for minor things
that only trouble the corners of our minds
from time to time**

**some of us are consumed by waiting,
unable to live fully
until our hopes and fears are resolved**

**none of us know how things will turn out
but we know that you do
but we know that you love**

how do we know how to be faithful,
when we don't know how things will work out?

how do we prepare?

what will we do in the meantime?

will it make a difference to what happens?

should we prepare for the best or the worst?

can hope and faithfulness encompass both outcomes?

none of us know how things will turn out

but we know that you do

but we know that you love

how do we wait serenely,
when our imaginations get in the way?

how do we wait for god to act,
without cooking up strategies for self-defence?
how do we accept uncertainty?

how long should we be prepared to wait?
how do we fill in the time, without wasting it?

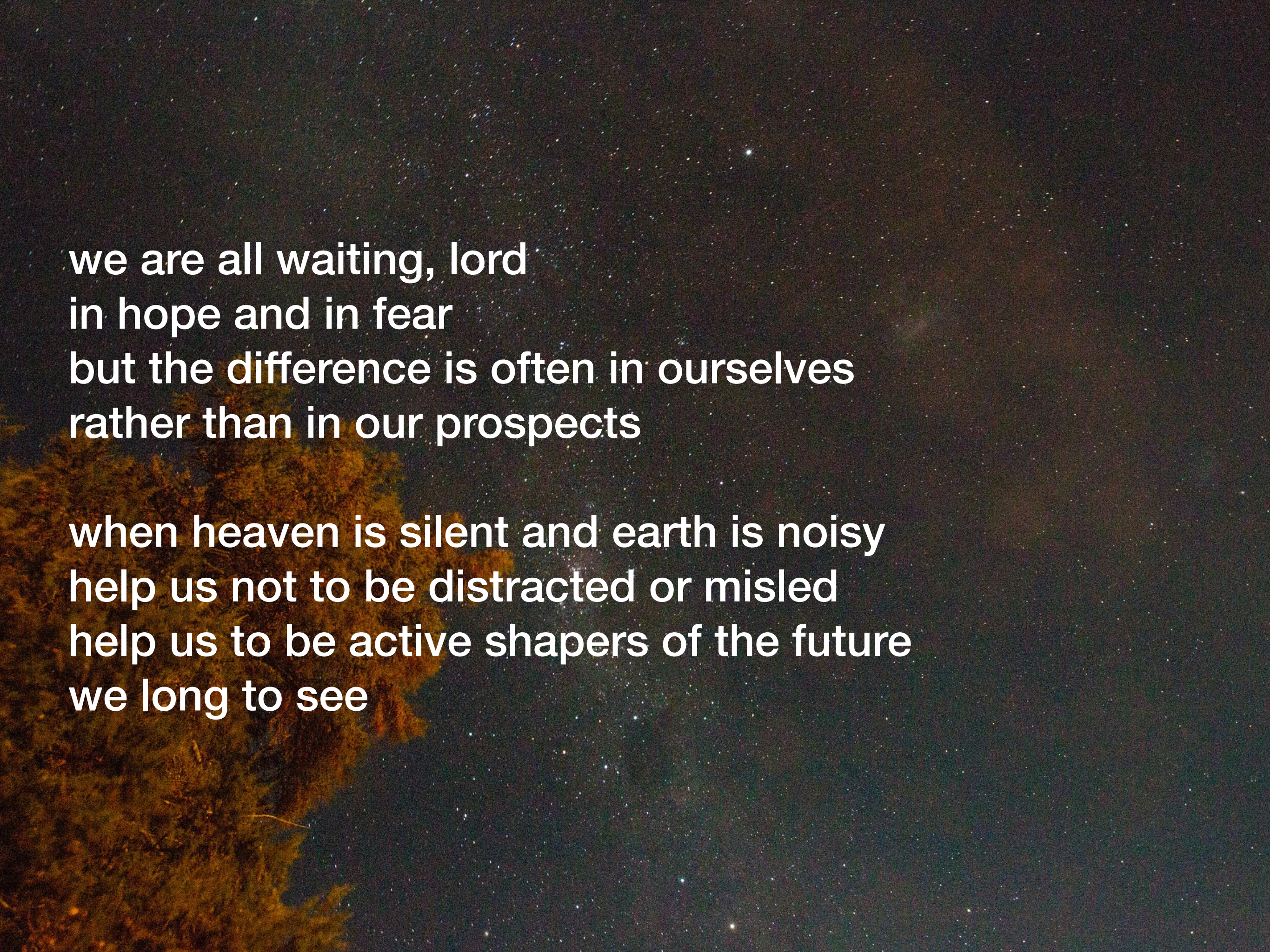
**none of us know how things will turn out
but we know that you do
but we know that you love**

how long does faith last when nothing happens?
why do we expect answers within a certain time?
why do we think the answer will be different,
if it doesn't come when we expect it?

do we think that delay means something
has gone wrong?

can we think that delay means something
is growing, like a flower,
or cooking, like a cake?

none of us know how things will turn out
but we know that you do
but we know that you love



we are all waiting, lord
in hope and in fear
but the difference is often in ourselves
rather than in our prospects

when heaven is silent and earth is noisy
help us not to be distracted or misled
help us to be active shapers of the future
we long to see

**even if we cannot make the future
we will prepare its place**

**even if we cannot cook the feast
we will lay the table and invite the guests**

**even if we cannot sing the song
we will make the silence in which it will be heard**

**even if we cannot see the dawn yet
we will live by the light that we have**

**we will remember the stories
of how you rewarded those who dared to wait**

**we will wait in the knowledge
that waiting is not in vain if it is waiting for you**

**you are the one who holds our future
you are the one who was, and is, and will be**

**walk with us tonight, and for ever
amen**

**I am with you always,
to the end of the age**

grace