

Insert here Your individual/Church's/ministry's mantra

Issue No. 11

ADVENT SPEAKS OF HOPE

Advent has begun! With a third of the world's population remembering Christ's first coming to be our Savior and Lord and anticipating his return, it will be hard to miss.

THE HISTORY OF ADVENT

Advent is derived from the Latin, *adventus*, which means *coming* (or *parousia* in the Greek of the New Testament). It refers retrospectively to our Lord's first arrival on earth and prospectively to his second.

Advent dates back to fourth and fifth century Spain and Gaul (modern France). It began as a preparation for the January baptisms (or initiations) of new Christians held during the Feast of Epiphany. The feast celebrated God's appearance in Christ, the visit from the wise men or *Magi* (Matthew 2:1), Jesus' baptism (John 1:29), and his first miracle, at Cana in Galilee (John 2:1). By the sixth century, Roman Christians were utilizing Advent to prepare for Christ's return as judge of the world. Later, during the Medieval period attention swung back to his initial coming. (Photo:<https://www.pinterest.ca/pin/71494712819000143/>).

Not until 1839 were Advent candles introduced, when, in Germany, a Lutheran minister used them to teach children of Christmas. Gradually, the Advent wreath developed. The evergreens came to symbolize everlasting life, and the four candles, lit sequentially during Advent, emphasized the hope, love, joy, and peace of the good news of Christ. The first, second, and fourth candles are purple and the third rose-colored. Sometimes a white candle is added and lit on Christmas Day to represent Christ's birth. Some Advent wreaths include holly and berries, connecting Christ's coming to the blood he shed on the Cross. Pinecones depict the new life procured for us by Christ's resurrection.

Obviously, the Advent season is man-made. The Bible speaks of both advents of Christ, the first in dishonor the

second in glory, but God has given us dates for neither, nor directives for celebrating them. While, then, the Advent season—festive and aesthetically pleasing for sure—is negotiable, the essence of Christianity—the hope, love, joy, and peace found in Christ is not.

THE HOPE OF ADVENT

How we need hope! God has inscribed it on our constitutions. Yet, since man first broke from God at the dawn of history, darkness and despair have been a part of life. We may explain this variously, but when we omit from our reckoning our spiritual blindness, rebellion of heart, and will to sin, we fail to get at the root of the issue: man's sin. God, however, has given us hope, and Advent is full of it.

Our hope focuses on God's plan to rescue man. It came into effect immediately following the Fall, but picked up pace with the formation of Israel. God called this small people, bestowing on them multiple privileges of his grace (Romans 9:4), and equipping them to be a light to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). The privileges told of the coming Messiah and encouraged faith in him. The law, convicting of sin, gave them reason to believe on him (Exodus 20:1-17; Deuteronomy 5:1-21). It also structured the obedience by which they showed their gratitude for their forgiveness and witnessed to the nations. Yet, Israel rebelled, dimming the nation's God-given light. By Messiah's arrival, Israel had been split into two kingdoms, exiled for mocking God's servants, and had not heard from God for 400 years. Yet, amid oppression by Persian, Greek, then Roman overlords, a remnant kept true to the Lord. The devoutly righteous Simeon spoke for them on taking the infant Jesus in his arms: *"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel"* (Luke 2:30-32). Hope fulfilled, he could die in peace. But can we? If you are not sure, do read on.



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SUNDAY WORSHIP TIMES

From His Fullness

ADVENT SPEAKS OF LOVE



**Celtic Trinity
Knot,
7th to 10th
century.**

Christians hope in Messiah because he embodies God's love to sinners. Hence the second candle. Note three massively heartwarming truths about this love.

I. GOD IS LOVE

God tells us this through his apostle John (I John 4:8). In effect, he is in essence love. That means there has never been a moment in which the everlasting God has not been loving. But how could he love anyone prior to creation? Because he is one God in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Enjoying equally the divine essence, they each love each other eternally, perfectly, fully, and incessantly.

This love not only reveals God to be incomparably beautiful—who else is spotlessly loving?—but also incomparably gracious. Without any pressure from without, and without any dissatisfaction or unmet need within, God has voluntarily opted to introduce us into the trifecta of his love. We can claim no reason why he should do so; not our size, creation in his image (which we have defaced), nor virtue (for we are, of ourselves unable to please God). The basis of God's love for this world is found in himself alone.

II. GOD REVEALS LOVE

It is through Christ that God has made known his love. As the Bible famously tells us: ***“God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”*** (John 3:16). In Christ, then, God's love is heard, seen, smelled, and felt. Wrote the hymnist Charles Wesley (1707–1788):

*Love divine, all loves excelling
Joy of heaven to earth come down . . .*

From the incarnate Christ we glean, first, that **God's love is humble**. Whereas God the Father sent forth or, literally, sent out of heaven his Son to save us from our sins (Galatians 4:4), God the Son was the one who voluntarily ***“made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant”*** (Philippians 2:7). As theologians have put it since at least the third-century *Epistles of Cyprian*, “The Son of God suffered that He might make us sons of God.” *On the Vanity of Idols* Cyprian writes, “What man is, Christ was willing to be, that man also may be what Christ is.”

Second, we may say that **God's love in Christ is holy**. Christ was ***“born of woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law”*** (Galatians 4:4). In other words, he kept the divine law so that there could be reckoned to the sinner's account a perfect righteousness before the law. This we could never acquire for ourselves.

Third, **God's love in Christ is healing**. He went to the cross in our humanity, there to suffer the righteous judgment of God in the sinners' place. Yet, Isaiah, describing Christ 800 years beforehand as the suffering servant, remarked, ***“with his stripes we are healed”*** (Isaiah 53:5).

Isaiah's prophesy teaches us that in the cross there is not only God's offer of acquittal from our guilt but the definitive medicinal solution for the wounds and infestations of our sin. If, then, the weight and stench of yours are overcoming you, take heart! As a wise man put it several centuries ago, “Christ is never loved till sin be loathed.” (Photo: The Great Isaiah Scroll Facsimile: <https://twitter.com/museumofbible/status/732367707853721601>.)



III. GOD ENTICES LOVE

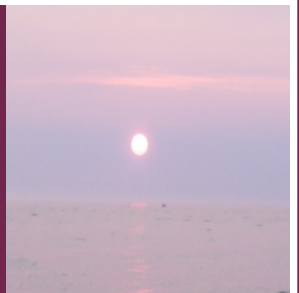
While, then, we are commanded to turn from our sins unto God, God has through Christ been wooing us to do so. Wrote the apostle Paul, ***“while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us”*** (Romans 5:6-8). Likewise, the apostle John wrote, ***“We love because he first loved us”*** (I John 4:19).

This love is so fantastic not simply because of the size differential between God and ourselves, or given how far we have fallen since our first parents fell into sin, but because God, in his omniscience (knowledge of all things), foresaw the very worst about us, yet he still sent his Son to save us. Thus, we celebrate this Advent the glorious truth that there is nothing in us to take God by surprise or to lead him to reverse his loving offer of salvation in Jesus.

The reversal must be ours, namely, of our rejection of Christ. For if, in our sin and our misery (whether felt yet or not), we reject the love God has poured out on this world through his Son, what other hope do we have? None! Read on, then, to consider the joy experienced when we come to rest on Jesus Christ for our salvation.

*Here is love, vast as the ocean,
Lovingkindness as the flood,
When the Prince of life, our ransom,
Shed for us his precious blood.
Who his love will not remember?
Who can cease to sing His praise?
He can never be forgotten
Throughout heaven's eternal days.*

William Rees (1802–1883).



ADVENT SPEAKS OF JOY

The third, rose-colored, candle lit in Advent season is called in Latin the *Gaudete* candle (meaning *rejoice*). It symbolizes the joy of those who, realizing the embodiment of God's love in Jesus, are wooed to return to God.

THE PROMISE OF JOY IN CHRIST

Joy comes through very prominently in the Bible's account of Christ's first coming to earth. Joy, though, was not new to those of faith. Amid his ministry Jesus made the remarkable claim that Abraham, who lived 2,000 years earlier, "*rejoiced that he would see my day. He saw it and was glad*" (John 8:56). Jesus does not tell us what Abraham saw, but it was enough to touch his heart. It put a skip in his step!

Abraham, the father of the nation, was not alone. All conscious of sin and its misery yearned to know God's love, and looking in faith to Messiah's coming, knew something of joy and gladness. It kept them through difficult days. Listen to the prophet Habakkuk (3:17-18):

*Though the fig tree should not blossom,
Nor fruit be on the vines,
The produce of the oil fail
and the fields yield no food
The flock be cut off from the fold
And there be no heard in the stalls,
Yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will take joy in the God of my salvation.*

That salvation came through the Messiah. God revealed this through his ordering of Israel's national life. As early as 1,500 B.C. God granted Moses the tabernacle and the sacrificial system indicating that the Messiah would be a priest. Not one offering animals to symbolize atonement but offering himself to procure it! Later, God used the nation's hankering for a king to teach them that the Messiah would be *the* King to never let them down. He would reign forever, with justice and righteousness (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 72:1)—a reign that would spread from nation to nation, promising joy to all coming under his merciful reign.

THE OUTBURSTS OF JOY

This backdrop explains the joyful paeans of praise that met Messiah's arrival. They began with John the Baptist, the one called of God to prepare the hearts of the people

for Messiah's arrival. Filled with the Spirit from his mother's womb, John leapt within her on the visit of the pregnant Mary to his parents' home in the Judean hills. Greeted by John's mother, Elizabeth, as "*the mother of my Lord*," Mary broke forth into her now renowned Magnificat. Although overawed by the incredible privilege of carrying to term our Lord, she rejoiced fundamentally that the one in her womb was "*God [her] Savior*." Her joy lay not, as many claim, in her own perfection, but in God's forgiveness of her sin through the forthcoming work of Christ (Luke 1:39-45). That is likewise where our solid joy is found.

Months later, Christ was born. The announcement was royal, accompanied by a heavenly fanfare. Consistent though with the mission of Christ, it came to lowly shepherds in the region of Bethlehem.

Writes Luke, "*an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people'*" (Luke 2:9-11). Suddenly the joy of heaven broke in on the scene—a multitude of angels praising God. Exchanging their fear for joy, the shepherds did the unthinkable: they left their sheep and headed into Bethlehem. There they found in the cattle trough, with Mary and Joseph looking on, the greatest of all shepherds of sheep—the Lord of glory, in human flesh, come to bring us into his fold.

THE EXPERIENCE OF JOY

We "the sophisticated" may learn from the simple folk of Jesus' day the vital truth that joy is found not

in the denial of personal sin, nor in a reckless involvement in it (as if it has no consequences), but in confession of it to God amid reliance on Christ who went on to pay its full price on the cross.

The good news heralded at Christ's birth is, then, counter-intuitive. To be raised to the joy of divine forgiveness requires a sinking in our own estimation. It is in our helpless collapsing on Jesus for salvation that we enter a relationship with "*he who is mighty*" (The Magnificat). God who scatters the proud, gathers to himself the humble penitents. This is indeed good news of great joy!

THE MAGNIFICAT

*My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit
rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked on the humble estate of
his servant.
For behold, from now on all generations
shall call me blessed;
For he who is mighty has done great things
for me,
And holy is his name.
And his mercy is for those who fear him
From generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts
of their hearts;
He has brought down the mighty from their
thrones
And exalted those of humble estate;
He has filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
In remembrance of his mercy,
As he spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham and to his offspring forever.*

LUKE 1:46-55 (ESV)

Residential Address:

ADVENT SPEAKS OF PEACE

Of ourselves, Advent is a contradiction. We look for hope but cling to our sin. We yearn to feel God's love, but are untroubled in grieving his Spirit. We are cynical about joy in Christ, but resist the repentance which leads to it, and we long for peace and acceptance with God but stand aloof from his overtures of grace in Christ.

Instead, then, of seeking God, we deem world turmoil our excuse to remain in our sins. Jesus, we claim, failed to deliver what the heavenly host proclaimed at his birth: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those [literally] of good pleasure!"* (Luke 2:14). But he hasn't failed.

First, Jesus came to gain for us **peace with God** (Romans 5:1). Through the shed blood of his cross he defeated the sin that set us at odds against God, and by exhausting in his own sufferings God's righteous anger against our sins he placated God. Thus God, by his intent in Christ, is at peace with those who, through the cross, he reconciles to himself. That's why Paul, once a renowned hater of Christ and his followers (those of "the way"!), could later write that *"[Christ] himself is our peace"* (Ephesians 2:14).

Second, Jesus came to gain for us the **peace of God**—a sense of *shalom* (wholeness, completeness, or tranquility) regardless of life's circumstances. Listen to Jesus' anticipation of his completed work on earth: *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid"* (John 14:27).

Third, Jesus came to gain for us **peace from God**. The first advent anticipated Jesus' return to inaugurate a new earth (Isaiah 11:6; 66:25; Matt. 19:28). There God will dwell with us (Revelation 21:1-2). We shall be one nation—the new perfected Israel, made up of those resting on Jesus from every tongue, nation, kindred, and tribe. World peace at last! See you on the new earth, then? You may forgo the candles, but you daren't ignore the Christ!



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