

Advent: Hope

Friends! I'd like to begin with prayer this morning!

Prayer:

Introduction:

So, this week, and for the rest of our Sundays up until Christmas, we'll be celebrating the ancient Christian season of Advent.

Advent means "arriving," or "coming" in Latin, and it's an old season that the church has used to help people to spiritually sort of prepare for Christmas and what the holiday means for us, and to also prepare for Jesus' return, which God has promised us.

So its a season of preparation, really. And each week in Advent we'll look at another topic: Hope today, soon Peace, Joy, then Love.

Today:

This morning we'll remember some of the promises that God's people were looking forward to, and the ways they were asked to prepare themselves for the day God would make good on those promises.

And we'll also remember the hopes we have as Christians, the promises we still long for, and one particular way we can prepare for the coming of the Lord.

Promises:

And God did make so many promises to his people, Israel;

there were so many things that God told them to expect. Promises about the ways God would restore their fortunes, about the ways God would save them from their terrors, about the ways God would validate them for worshipping Him, when all the people around them worship all sorts of idol gods instead of the true God. Promises were made about the way God would bring peace for them, provide for them-- food, shelter, safety--and would even bring non-Israelites into his people, into the people of God.

Amazing promises, God set amazing hopes for his people. We've seen some of these in the Minor Prophets already. And so many of these promises can be summed up in the hope that God would be with his people, with them as he'd been at the start of creation, closer than when the Temple was down the street, closer than when a Spirit-filled prophet speaks to them.

Immanuel:

And it was an expectation that came true, right? In Jesus?

Joseph, Mary's husband-to-be, finds out that Mary, Jesus' mom is pregnant--and not by him; so he decides to divorce her, quietly, saving her honor. This is an integrity move. But the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream, and says:

"Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will be with child and

will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us." (Matt 1:20-23, NIV)

Mary realizes that in her son the promises of history are about to come true. She sings a song of praise, of remembrance:

***"My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
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.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their
inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers."
(luke 1:46b-55)***

Mary, and so many others, saw in the birth of Jesus the realization of the hopes of Israel, saw God coming through, "even as he said he would," showing up and being with and

for them.

And Jesus showed up, and lived, and died, and rose back to life, and changed the course of history for everyone, for all creation. Whether you trust God or not, the flow of history has been shaped by Jesus. We talk about this stuff all the time; but we can't forget that Immanuel, God with us; Jesus-- he came after generations and generations of waiting, and praying, and hoping...and of preparing.

Called to Prepare:

God's people were always being called to prepare themselves for the day when God would come through. Every passage in the Old Testament that talks about the day when God would come through for His people is preceded by calls for repentance, for preparation and a return to the Lord.

And the arrival of Jesus, his entrance into ministry; it was prepared for, too. Mark sets this up for us:

It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

***"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—***

***"a voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.' "***

And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and

wild honey. And this was his message: "After me will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

**At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."
(Mark 1:2-11 niv)**

Now, John the Baptist was a crotchety fella; he's a fire & brimstone sort of guy. But he had an important role to play in the fulfillment of God's promises; he was a preparer of people.

Jesus speaks incredibly highly of him, calling him the greatest of all the people born before his arrival, because of the way he prepared people for Jesus, calling them to make a way for him.

In Between:

And we need to to make way for the Lord in our lives, among us, don't we, because in many ways we're in the same place as God's people were in right before Jesus showed up.

Of course, there are some pretty big differences between us & them: we're God's People not because we were born into some particular ethnicity, but because we've been reborn into one particular Spirit, into one particular life, the life of Jesus, right? Our rebirth trumps all the national and ethnic

allegiances we are born into.

But there are hopes that God's People had before Jesus first showed up that we still have, we're still looking forward to swords and spears being turned into the honest tools of work, we're still looking forward to a time when "Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore," as Isaiah puts it. We're still looking for a time when the widow and orphan aren't judged for the color of their skin or in what language they can most comfortably say "I love you."

And Jesus didn't leave us alone in this middle time; we've got the Holy Spirit, a promise God made to his people long before Jesus arrived, the Holy Spirit who can help us in a thousand ways to prepare for his return. God gave us the Spirit for us to live in between the time he left and the time he would come again.

The Spirit who brings in our lives, as we rest in him, virtues like "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." We have each other. We have Scripture. We have our guts, our intuition, which I find myself checking in with more and more lately.

An Unhelpful Habit:

And while having a season once a year, and a Communion or two to remind us to prepare ourselves for the return of Jesus may help us, may be really important, we could take the opportunity Advent provides us to think more deeply about one particular way we talk about hope.

Because we have created for ourselves an unhelpful habit.

The habit of “putting our hope” in things, in people, in events.

As Christians, our ultimate hope is that God will come through, right? That Jesus will return and bring with him--whatever the mechanics of it are--a renewed world, where life is as it should be. Our hope is directed toward this goal: that Christ will return and bring the restoration of all things with him. That’s the thing we’re watching for. That's the promise that motivated the early Church, that got people doing crazy things and--gasp--telling strangers about God.

But we get distracted, and our watch gets a little haphazard, and our far horizon gets a little boring, so we start looking at nearer ones, things closer by, and over time, the hope that God has been holding out, the hope that we have placed in God’s hands to come through and to make things right:

We take it back, and we start placing it other places, we put it other places. And of course, we cheapen hope in the process.

We “put our hope” in lesser places. That desire that we all have for everything to be wonderful the way we know everything is supposed to be: we take a watered down version--the "hope" for a day without hassle, or the desire for tomorrow to be marginally easier than today--we attach it to things, to people. We associate the promise of a good future with some thing or some person.

We do this with people all the time: How many people do we know who think that if they just get a girlfriend or a boyfriend or a spouse, if they just have a child, if they just had one

more friend, or if that one relationship would just improve, then life would be okay, then they could look forward to the future with optimism. We do this with careers--if we just got a few more dollars, a slightly bigger benefits package, a matching 401k--we do this with talents--most of the time, I fundamentally believe if I could play the banjo my life would be better--we do this with achievements, and we do it with stuff. We

When we're talking about "putting our hope in things," "when" is the key word we need to pay attention to. If we're using the word "when," and making some mention of our happiness in the same sentence we should take some time to examine our hearts. If we believe that "when" this or that happens, everything will be okay, we have misplaced our hope.

When was the last time you told yourself this?

Tired of Looking:

But sometimes, we get so tired of looking far out toward the future, to the far horizon, patiently waiting and preparing for Jesus' return, come high water or what feels like hell, we just give up. We stop looking out and ahead all together, and we begin to look at what we've got in our hands right now. We don't even talk about "when," don't daydream about someday. We just talk about what we've got.

The real hope of all things being made new transforms into the weak pleasure of the moment, and whatever thing we are touching, or tasting, or talking to. We trade away "the very best" for "good enough right now," forgetting that the very best is something greater than we could imagine or ask

for, and the stuff of life we do have isn't for us alone. We trade preparing ourselves for the return of the Lord for preparing ourselves to have a good evening. Instead of gathering up good deeds, we gather up pleasure. This is the outlook of a child, who doesn't want to eat his or her vegetables, because the sugary fat of junk food tastes so much better. If hope deferred makes the heart sick, hope traded away for distracting stimulation kills it outright.

We give a little ground, and a little more ground, and a little more ground, and the things we need to keep us going until the day of the Lord arrives--simple food and simple drink and loving friends--they get left behind. And instead we pant after stuff of the world. We forget that "finer things" are not permanent, and when Jesus returns, they'll be lost.

We trade the heavenly bride of Christ, the New Jerusalem of Revelation, where there will be enough--enough food, enough medicine, enough light, more good, full friendship of God and one another than we can imagine--and turn instead to the stuff of Rome's merchants.

The Merchants:

Remember the passage we read today? The merchants of Rome realize, too late, that all their fine luxurious goods, all the stuff that we turn to when we stop hoping for Jesus' return--it's done, and empty.

11 "The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore— 12 cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind

made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; 13 cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves.

14 "They will say, 'The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.' 15 The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn 16 and cry out:

" 'Woe! Woe to you, great city, dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet, and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!

17 In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!'

In Preparation, Hope:

Listen.

I may be far too dramatic here. We may be all sorts of gourmet, love all sorts of finer things, for God's sake, somehow; we may be piling up stuff just so we can climb on the piles and look out with a better view for Jesus' return. I am certainly over-rhetorical, and may be worried for no reason, and no one in the room has shifted our view from the coming of the Lord to the stuff going into our houses and our stomachs. But I guess, you know: I know many Christians, here and elsewhere, and very few of them seem to hope for Jesus' return and God to make good on His promises. Mostly

they, we, hope tomorrow doesn't suck.

But if we find we are putting our hope in the things of this world only, or even too much, we must change our ways. If the hope for some new shiny Christmas present has replaced the hope of the return of Christmas' star, then we are in dangerous ground that could give out beneath us at any moment.

The season of Advent is our opportunity to *right now* reject the impermanent things of this world and prepare ourselves for the good enough of the world to come. And the good enough of that world is far better than whatever name brand luxury we have or whatever delicious treat we could consume.

It's shopping season, you know? It's buying season, and feasting season. But John saw all Rome's wealth laid waste; all the preoccupation of purchasing and hoarding amounted to nothing in this vision of John's.

As we go about our nearly-Christmas business, live in this time in between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day, we can't forget that we are living in a time between Jesus' first arrival and his second. And we have to ask ourselves: Where is my hope?

We can take this window of time to honestly assess ourselves: What do you put your hope in?

Has the hope of a restored, reconciled, resurrected world been traded away, one thoughtless purchase or unhealthy pleasure at a time, for the measly high that comes from

some *thing* of this life?

Remembering that Jesus is coming prioritizes things for us. If it doesn't, we have not taken seriously the promises wrapped up in Jesus' return. Meanwhile, the world is today training us to live for an ever-present now, live always for the pleasure of this moment, and to suck and consume as much pleasure out of this moment as we can.

But this moment will give way, permanently, to a world where our greatest needs will be met more completely than every child together could daydream up.

Let the Hope of Advent re-prioritize your life, and let's take seriously the opportunity to ask ourselves if we even look forward to Jesus' return anymore, or if we've given in to the constant attention-cry of this moment and the destined-to-decay stuff that makes it up.

Prayer:

Lord, help us to say, with the psalm-writer, "I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, in his word I put my hope. I wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning."

We know that you are coming, and you bring with you a new morning, a dawn in a world that will be good as you are good, without qualification, without hurt, without sorrow or fear.

But we live in this world, and it is sneaky, and it distracts us from you and asks for all our commitments. Return our eyes to your advent, and in this Advent season, help us to live in the light of your return, and not in the artificial shininess that

the toys, and achievements, and food, and other things of this world give off.