

A Sermon for DaySpring
by Eric Howell
Looking Back, Looking In, Looking Forward
The First Sunday of Advent
November 29, 2020

Today is the 1st Sunday of Advent; the New Year's Day in the Christian church liturgical year. Today we begin again on this beautiful journey of 52 Sundays which direct our worshipping attention and redirect our lives to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and his ongoing ministry in and through the Church in the world.

We get started in the year with a season called Advent, four Sundays that make a season of preparation. Christians begin the year with preparation, which, of course, is what you do when you're something important is happening. You prepare for it. You prepare for exams by studying; you prepare for a big game by training, practicing, getting your mind right. You prepare to paint a house by scraping, sanding, taping, drop cloths, having the right equipment. The prep work is most of the paint work. Preparation.

You prepare for your wedding day by a hundred thousand things and for the arrival of your 1st born by setting up a crib and learning to install a car seat and learning how to survive on two or three hours of sleep each night. Many of you spent several days this week preparing for Thanksgiving. You don't just show up to a Thanksgiving table to eat. Well, maybe YOU do, but someone prepared the meal for you. Someone thought in advance what to buy, pick, harvest, or slaughter. Someone thought about how the ingredients would go together and how the different sides would complement one another. Someone prepared. Ask anyone who has bought a frozen turkey on Wednesday planning to eat on Thursday how important it is to prepare in advance for something big.

Christians have a whole season just for preparation and anticipation of what's to come: Advent. Having a whole season reminds us that being ready isn't just the preamble to grace, it's part of our spiritual training. Learning to wait well for Christ's coming isn't just what you do before the spiritual work begins, it's part of it. Over and over in the Gospels, the message comes loud and clear: I'm coming so be ready, watch, prepare, stay awake, stay alert. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Advent is the liturgy of desire for the inbreaking of the Lord into the world. This is what we long for even if the prophets warn us to watch what we're hoping for. But we long for God, we need God; we need relief, and justice, and righteousness; we need God's Lordship. Mostly we need grace in all these things. We need, dare we ask, for Divine Love. We need God. And God is coming. And we can hardly wait.

Advent is about the coming of Christ who was and is and is to come. Christ, who came and who is here and who will return. And so, we look back, look around, and within, and we look forward.

Looking backward, Advent remembers the desire of Israel for the coming of the Messiah. In a bit of time-bending theological imagination, we look forward to the historical coming of the Messiah to Bethlehem. In other words, we get ready for Christmas. This is the part of Advent we're best at, and everyone thinks they know something about how to do this. It is as if the world even said, "4 weeks? Nah. 4 weeks is not enough. We need 8 weeks. So we need to start after Halloween. We need 8 weeks of shopping, hallmark movies, Christmas music radio stations, and house decorations." I was informed by my lovely and wise wife this year that I was not allowed to complain about this, at least not in 2020. She said, In 2020, not a word of complaint about Christmas before Thanksgiving. And especially, she said, not a word of complaint about how Christmas really should wait until after Advent and then burst open like light in the darkness on December 24. Not a word, we need all the beauty we can get this year.

Ok, then. In Advent, we look back to a time when people of God looked forward to the coming of the Messiah who would come to Bethlehem. We are reliving, sometimes reenacting the anticipation and the arrival of the Incarnate Son of God born to Mary, laid in a manger, shepherds, angels, wise men. Maybe some years, we should wait until Christmas to celebrate this, but if we celebrate a little ahead of time, so be it. Sometimes we need to find all the mirth we can find, summon all the joy we can muster, and let the bending of time do its thing. Happy Advent, Christ has come.

Advent also looks for God in and around us here and now in the present moment. In Advent, our spiritual eyes are opened again for how to look for God here and now, stirring within us, moving among us. Where do you see God today? It's a question we sometimes ask children, but why not ask it of ourselves each day. Where do I see and feel the divine fingerprints? What stirs in me to live my faith in love of neighbor and all God's creation? What is being renewed in my faith today? This is the season for spiritual renewal. If you feel like your spiritual well is empty and your spiritual bucket comes back up empty, this is the time to begin to fill your well again.

Advent gets to do more work in us than the work of hanging wreaths. For the spiritual well to fill with life-giving waters, most of us have to do some emptying of our well from all the stuff we've dumped in over the side all through the year. A lot of our spiritual wells are filled up with noise and distraction and all the things of this and every season. Anxiety and anger and regrets. The spiritual well of faith will fill again, but it cannot fill when it's crowded out by everything else we have let in. Let your appetites rest; let grace do the deep inner work needed in you it has to do. Let there be some forgiveness where it's needed. Let there be some understanding where it's become threadbare. And let the water of life begin to fill again your deep spiritual well. *Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, not stands in the way of sinners, not sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law, he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water* (Psalm 1).

This is time for renewal in the living God in Christ here and now. Christ was born Bethlehem. Christ is born in us anew now. And so, Advent is not just nostalgia and celebration; it is renewal. This is a season for a return to the basics: read the scripture, pray, be silent, write, listen, fast, give. Salvation doesn't come through our spiritual disciplines, but these disciplines are like lowering the bucket for the sweet water Christ promises us—the water of Christ that renews us. Like exercising lungs for cleaner air, like preparing soil for the gospel seeds—Jesus used all

the metaphors in his stories. If you feel like you've lost your bearings, begin again. Back to the start. Let's begin again. You'll find grace waiting for you here as you seek God in the here and now. Sweet Advent, Christ is here.

Looking back, looking in, looking forward. Advent also points the way forward to a future and a hope. Christ will come again. Advent points the way toward what is to come. This season renews our desire for Christ to come, as NT Wright puts it, to put the world to rights. We need so much to be put to rights. Professor Wright, the well-loved British New Testament scholar was scheduled to preach at DaySpring back in June. His cancelled visit is just one of so very many things that were bent almost unrecognizable this year. We keep longing for Christ to rend the heavens and come. The great biblical hope is that all of current time and the current of all time is preparation for his return in glory.

The Bible is not romantic about God's coming though. Mark's Gospel paints a dark scene of the time at the end of times. "In those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken."

Are we supposed to read that literally or metaphorically? Does it literally mean the celestial sources of light will dramatically be extinguished? Or does it describe the painful truth of life that things can be so troubling in life, it can be as if the sun has ceased to shine. Either way, the day of the Lord's coming, in this view, is into a time of suffering and pain. It echoes Amos's warning about the day of the Lord, "It will not be light, it will be a day of darkness." The bible seers often foretold God's coming not as a happy day made happier by God showing up, but as God's light bursting in the dark. God rending the heavens and coming down. God's truth busting through the lies; God's justice washing away evil like rolling waters. Advent, at least in part, is anticipating that day to come, too, and hungering for God's recompense to come.

This is not holiday-cheery at all, but truth be told, that's important to hold on to. Even in Advent. Yes, especially in Advent. I don't mean that there needs to be a place for grinch in Whoville, but when we are looking for the Lord, our eyes are attuned to see more clearly everything that's not yet put to rights. We see more clearly what's broken in us and what's broken in the world. Holy lament is part of preparation for the coming of the Lord.

Lament is the dissonant part of the holiday season, the minor keys in the Christmas melodies. For all the holiday happiness, this is the more truthful part for those who have eyes to see the truth about themselves and the world. It is eyes to see how much we need God to come. All around out there are the twinkly trappings of a holiday of mirth, and Christians are supposed to be weeping? Well, isn't life big enough for both to coexist? Doesn't it already? To know Christ at all is to grieve for what is not yet fulfilled in Christ's kingship. To know Love is to mourn the broken places and to see them for what they are. To know Peace at all is to mourn the ever-present places of war-torn suffering. To know Joy is to weep with those who weep. To know Hope; well, to know Hope at all is how we hold it together. It's all things are held together in hope. And hope, as you may know, is the theme of the 1st Sunday of Advent, the first day in the year points our hearts and minds toward one simple word; the divine glue that holds all things together, that holds everything, and some days, holds us from falling apart. We begin right

here, right where we must: our feet planted firmly on the ground, and a candle of hope lit against the darkness. We begin firmly on the ground of in hope in Christ, who came to Bethlehem; Christ who is here with us now in the Spirit; Christ who will come again to put the world to rights.

Happy Advent, Christ has come. We can have Faith.

Sweet Advent, Christ is here with you. We can know his Love.

Holy Advent, Christ will come again. We can hold on in Hope. We can hold on in Hope in Christ.

Welcome to the season of Christ's comings.

Amen.

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