

CORAL RIDGE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Days *of the* Lord

2022 ADVENT DEVOTIONAL

Advent invites us to look back and forward at the coming of Christ in the world and in our hearts. The atonement—forgiveness of sins, adoption as children—for which humanity was waiting has already come through Christ, and yet we eagerly await His return which is not yet here. The season of Advent has a wonderfully-rich history that should guide our hearts into expectation, joy, hope, self-reflection, and ultimately a deeper sense of worship of Jesus.

The term “advent” derives from the Latin verb *advenire*, which simply means “to arrive” or “to come.” Throughout the first four centuries, Christians understood Advent to have a dual reference to Jesus’ first coming into this world from his virgin mother as well as His second coming. But the earliest evidence we have of Christians considering “Advent” a season comes from the fifth and sixth centuries. Pope Leo I in the fifth century viewed the closing of the agricultural year in mid-December through a liturgical and theological connection to the end of time, the consummation of history, and thus, the second coming of Christ. However, it’s not until the councils of Tours in the sixth century that we find specific mention of the Advent Season in a threefold sense: as a season of Lent, of penitence leading to baptism, as celebration of Christ’s birth and the victory over death in His crucifixion and resurrection, and of course the Parousia or second coming of the royal, exalted Christ.

The theme for this year’s devotion is “Days of the Lord.” The Bible begins with the creation of the world, when God sets the cosmos on its course of seasons and cycles—evening and morning, days, months, and years. Each day we are warned to heed God’s word, “Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart” (Heb. 3:15). Frequently God speaks of a coming “day” of the Lord, when he would draw near for judgment. When God brings judgment upon Egypt, he calls it “the day of the Lord God of Hosts” (Jer. 46:10). Malachi says that the time of the Messiah would be the “great and awesome day of the Lord” (Mal. 4:5).

Each reading for our devotion will highlight a particular “day” of the Lord—a time when God drew near to his people. We pray that you will be both challenged and encouraged. May we each seek the Lord this season with humility and repentance as we meditate upon God’s righteous judgments and the dangers of sin. May we each experience the Lord’s presence with us and our families as we meditate that God has made his dwelling place with us in Christ. And may we be emboldened in faith knowing that the Lord who came two-thousand years ago has been raised to the right hand of God to reign until all things are made new.

Luke 1:26-38

Author: *Caleb Koornneef*

During Advent, we celebrate the birth of Jesus by remembering his incarnation over 2000 years ago. Advent has always been one of my favorite seasons. There is so much anticipation and hope. One of my favorite family traditions growing up was putting ornaments on the "Jesse Tree."

I don't remember if my mom came up with the idea or learned it somewhere else, but it was always a huge hit for me and my siblings because each day leading up to Christmas, we got to take turns hanging one ornament on this smaller sort of scraggly looking tree. It was called the "Jesse Tree" because it represented the hope that "a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit" (Isaiah 11:1). Each of the ornaments was specific to a name of Jesus. The crown ornament represented the "King of kings." The apple ornament was a reminder that He is the great Teacher. The pen ornament showed that Jesus is the Author and Perfecter of our faith. We even had a little clay pot ornament with some putty in it that represented the Potter and the clay. It was such a fun way to anticipate Christmas and place our hope in God.

In his commentary on Romans, the late Dr. R.C. Sproul said, "Hope is not taking a deep breath and hoping things are going to turn out all right. It is assurance that God is going to do what He says He will do." This is exactly the case with Mary in her encounter with the angel Gabriel in Luke 1. She had a lot of reasons to fear, but in the end, Mary had hope because she believed God's Word (vs. 38).

It is one thing to place hope in Christ as we celebrate his first coming over 2000 years ago, but the real reason we can have hope each Advent is because of everything that came after his birth. God not only drew near to us as the Christ-child in human flesh, He established a kingdom that all previous rulers could only point to. Not only did Jesus come to be born as a baby, He came to die as a man so that you and I could be born again. Not only did the star point the Magi to the house of Jesus and His earthly parents, it pointed to the greater reality that Christ is the true Light of the world who came to shine on our darkness as sinful people.

As Christians, we don't merely place our hope in that which already happened; we look with confidence and expectation to our future, knowing that no matter what we face, Christ is with us. He is our hope and strength. This season, may we ponder not just the meaning of hope, but the Object of our hope, which is Christ Jesus our Lord.

Genesis 1-2:3

Author: *David Bibee*

The world was created for a purpose. God created the world as the domain of his glory. The world is place where God can be known. More than that, the created world we experience daily—everything we see, hear, feel, touch, taste, and smell—reflects God the creator. God uses “the things that have been made” to display his “invisible attributes ... eternal power, and divine nature” to all mankind (Rom. 1:20). God gives to us Half Dome and the Grand Canyon and reveals himself as our “Rock and Redeemer,” (Psa. 19:14), the “cornerstone,” (Luke 20:17, 1 Pet. 2:6), the one whose word is a rock foundation (Matt. 7:24), the one whose kingdom will become the “chief of all the mountains” (Isa. 2:2). God’s glory has the “appearance of a jasper” (Rev. 4:3). Everything else was created to help us know God better.

Our greatest problem is natural blindness due to sin. We go about our days in the world unaware – physically there without noticing. We look, but don’t see. We hear, but aren’t listening. We eat, but don’t savor. We are in the world without noticing much of anything. Our dullness is not morally neutral. Those who do not “honor him as God or give thanks to him [become] futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts [are] darkened” (Rom. 1:21).

Despite our blindness, the world is ablaze with the glory of its maker. Out of all creatures, humanity alone was made to know God, to see the good world God made, and to respond with delight, thanksgiving and praise. Alexander Schmemmann describes it this way: “All that exists is God’s gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man’s life communion with God ... God blesses everything he creates, and, in the biblical language, this means that he makes all creation the sign and means of his presence and wisdom, love and revelation: ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good.’” Humanity is created to be “the priest” who “stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God” in thanksgiving.

Every “today” we experience is the day that the Lord has made (Psa. 14:1). Every “today” is the day God draws near to be found, reflected in everything around us. Every single “today” is the day when you can hear God’s voice and respond. Every day lived in relationship with God is “the day of the Lord.”

Genesis 2:4-3:24

Author: *David Bibee*

One day, my Pa and I went fishing at the lake ten minutes from home. Despite hearing shouts of warning from him, I sprinted down the dirt path that led to the lake with reckless abandon. Before I knew it, I had run into a rattlesnake, which pulled its head back right as I stopped in my tracks. In a cartoonish moment, I jumped, spun around midair, and took off running back toward my dad. But it was a win-win: I made it out fine and my dad rather enjoyed witnessing my reaction to that positive reinforcement. I had heard his warning, but I didn't listen.

Listening in the Bible is presented as a matter of life and death. God created Adam to be the high priest of the garden sanctuary. Eve, the mother of all the living, was created to be Adam's helper in filling the world with the glorious image of God. As God worked for six days and then took up his throne, designating the Sabbath as a holy day, humanity would work for six days until gathering for worship in God's presence on the Sabbath. God created the world as the place he would be known and human as the people who would know him. Each week, God would draw near, to speak words of life, to walk with and bless them. Each week they would be shaped by God's word.

When God drew near to them that day, the scriptures say, literally, "the man and his wife heard the voice of Yahweh God walking in the garden" in "the spirit of the day" (Gen. 3:8). They hid in fear at the sound. David tells us of God's furious voice: "Smoke rose from his nostrils; consuming fire came from his mouth, burning coals blazed out of it... [He] thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded" (Psa. 18:8, 11-13).

Adam's first task was "to work and to keep" the garden (Gen. 2:15). He didn't listen. He should have killed the serpent or driven him out of the garden. Now they would be driven out of the garden (Gen. 3:23-24) and would die as God had said (Gen. 2:17). But God does not speak only curses.

Paul tells us "a profound mystery" that marriage—the union of "man and his wife"—is a picture of "Christ and the church" (Eph. 5:32). Their lives were a living reminder of God's promise, even after the fall—be fruitful and multiply and one day a child will be born to crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). God's Word that walked in the garden and covered them in bloody robes (Gen. 3:31), would take on flesh to be stripped and bloodied himself (John 1:14). One day, a perfect high priest—a Son who listens to Father—would come to make us new (Heb. 1:1-3).

GENESIS 17 & 22

Author: *Tim Sansbury*

In Genesis 22, we read the remarkable story of God testing Abraham by asking him to sacrifice his son. This story evokes a lot of different reactions. Some people see it as unimaginable and angry, proof the God of the Bible is not the good God He is named. Others see Abraham's faith as so strong he went up the mountain without any fear or worry, knowing God would rescue Isaac.

I have no idea what was actually happening in Abraham's mind and heart, but I have to believe that was a horrible walk. I can only imagine how my mind would be roiling with different thoughts: God promised! This can't be real. He's too good for this! I have to obey. God doesn't lie. God forbids murder. Maybe this is a dream! (Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!)

I just know I would not be calmly walking and trusting.

It is true that Abraham should have known that everything would be OK. If you remember in Genesis 17, God promised Abraham he would make a great nation out of him, and that Isaac was the promised child from whom that nation would grow. In Hebrews 11:17-19, we learn that by faith, Abraham believed that promise and knew God could even raise Isaac from the dead... but this means he was afraid Isaac might actually have to die! What a walk with the child of the promise, your own son, trustingly following as you contemplate his death.

But to those who see this story as a terror, look at the picture we get of the Gospel. Abraham is willing to give up his only son for God, but God provides a substitute. A ram caught by its horns took Isaac's place on the altar and rescued him from death. But while Abraham did not ultimately give up his son for God, God did give up His Son for us. Isaac lived, and Jesus died. Isaac by living is the child promising a temporary, earthly people of God, and Jesus by dying is the child promising a permanent, heavenly people of God.

God demonstrated His love for Abraham by entering into his life (again) in a ram to save his son. This advent season we anticipate the time He entered into our lives through His Son to save us from our sins. Imagining the terror of intentionally sending a child to death is horrible, but it becomes beautiful when we use that imagination to see how much God loved us, that he was willing to do exactly that to make us His children forever. Praise God!

Exodus 12

Author: *Sam Lamerson*

In Nashville, Tennessee, there is an exact duplicate of the Greek Parthenon. Inside is a stature of Athena, guarded by two really big snakes. Standing there as I looked at the stone snakes that were much bigger than I was, caused me to realize how frightening it would be to believe this god was in some control over the world. I could imagine those in the first century worrying about offending this god, or some other. This is why Pharaoh asks Moses "Who is the Lord that I should obey him?" He is essentially saying that he has his own gods and doesn't see any need to add others. There were many gods in Egypt at that time, cat gods, crocodile gods, and even frog gods. What the Pharaoh fails to realize is that there are "gods" and then there is "Yahweh." Even the ten plagues were attacks on these different gods, showing that Yahweh was the "God above all gods."

Stories are what makes us who we are. For the Jewish people, the Passover was one of the greatest events in the history of the people of Israel. It became a meal of remembrance about how God had taken them out of Egypt and eventually into the promised land. More than that, it was the story of life. God had saved the lives of the Israelite children while taking the lives of the Egyptians. The mark of salvation was the blood of what was called a "Passover lamb." This meal came to be celebrated not only by Jewish people, but also by followers of Jesus the Messiah. For the Hebrews, the meal looked back to what God had done for them in Egypt. For Christians the meal looks forward to the coming of the Lord as well, what happened on the cross. What makes this meal unique?

First, it reminds us of what God did for us on the cross. That is, it shows us that the blood that was shed for us was the blood of forgiveness. The Lord's Supper (the Christian name of the event) reminds us that God the Father sent his only son to die and pay the price for us. Second, it reminds us of the "once for all" nature of this sacrifice. Second-temple Israel was a nation in which animal sacrifice was a common event. Yet, the sacrifice of Jesus was an event that never needed to be repeated. The debt had been paid.

Third, it reminds us of the fact that wrongdoing is real, has real consequences, and cannot be "glossed over." Our sin is like a debt that we owe God. Jesus is the one who paid that debt. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we realize that Jesus paid our bill and paid it in full. The important thing to remember is that this could not have occurred if Jesus had not become a man. From the very earliest parts of the Scripture we see hints of the need to make restitution for our sin. The problem, is that we couldn't pay. The bill was too high, and we had no hope of ever paying it. Christmas celebrates the birth of the one who took our sin. The Lord's Supper celebrates not only the death of that one but reminds us to look forward to his return. The baby in the manger was the salvation of the world. That is why Pharaoh should have obeyed him and that is why we should obey him.

Exodus 40 & Deuteronomy 6

Author: Andrew Siegenthaler

*Jesus loves me, this I know,
for my daddy (and momma) tells me so.*

That's not the way the song goes, but it could. The Lord delights in pouring his grace down the lines of generations—parents telling their children and their children's children the Gospel of Salvation through the Messiah. This grand theme runs throughout the Bible.

In Genesis 17 the Lord says to Abraham: *"I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you."* This is where it all begins—the promise of generational grace. It's repeated in the Law. The Second Commandment says: *"I the Lord your God am a jealous God, showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."* Let that sink in for a minute. A thousand generations. This really is a redemptive strategy for all of history.

You find this promise in the Psalms. David sang: *"From everlasting to everlasting, the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children."* The Prophets spoke of it. The Lord said to Jeremiah: *"My Spirit is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever."*

The Lord Jesus himself repeated it in the Gospels when he said: *"Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."* The Apostles echoed it in the book of Acts: *"The promise is for your children.. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and household."*

In Deuteronomy 6, Moses imagines children asking their parents: Why do we have all these commandments? Why do we live by the law of God? The answer Moses tells parents to give their children is not—Because God says so. Or, because it's good for you—though both those things are true. Instead, Moses tells parents to answer their children with the Gospel of Salvation. Tell your children we live this way because God in his grace brought us out of slavery in Egypt by his mighty miracles and gave us the Promised Land! In New Testament terms that means telling your children we live this way because Jesus Christ saved us from sin by his mighty work on the cross and has given us eternal life and the new creation! That's why we obey him. That's why we love his law. Because he has come and rescued us and made us his people! He's our Savior, and we can trust him. That's good news for every child of God.

Judges 1-2

Author: *David Bibee*

As modern Christians, we often spiritualize our faith, focusing solely on going to heaven when we die. But evil has real world consequences alongside having eternal consequences. When we embrace a view of the Christian life that only thinks about afterlife, we will regularly fail to take seriously that God gave humans dominion. God called the world “very good” and gave us charge over it. Our “personal” sin isn’t personal at all, but has worldly, material, social, political consequences.

A child may act like a petty tyrant, but children lack the authority to impact the world in significant ways. Some remain petty tyrants when they grow up. One who runs a Department of Motor Vehicles may have the ability to impact thousands. The tyrants who reigns over the communist regimes of the twentieth century, however, were responsible for almost one-hundred million deaths. If sin is allowed to thrive, it often becomes more severe.

But just as sin has real world consequences, so does righteousness and obedience. God rescued his people out of bondage in Egypt in order that his people would be free to gather and worship him. Through Abraham and his “seed,” much like the promise made to Eve, all the nations that were divided at Babel would be blessed. Abraham’s children were to become a “kingdom of priests” and “a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6).

God commanded his people, as his “treasured possession,” to devote the Canaanites and their idols “to complete destruction” (Deut. 7:2). These kinds of judgments startle us, particularly when we are thinking only in terms of afterlife. But they were to have no pity because the people and their gods would be a snare to them. The time of the judges shows us the result of their failure. It also shows us the danger we face if we do not face sin as seriously in our own lives. They did not teach their children God’s ways so their children did not remember the covenant. They allowed themselves to be seduced by worldly values. They did not finish the task of cleansing the land. They were slowly seduced, until they tolerated and committed every kind of evil.

Yet God is faithful – he responds when his people seek his face and cry out in repentance. God cares about the real world and the actual land. God intends his people to have an impact as priestly people. When righteousness increases in a land “the people rejoice,” but when “the wicked rule, the people groan” (Prov. 29:2). God intends us to be the “light of the world” and a shining “city set on a hill” (Matt. 5:14). In Christ, the true Judge, he has given us power to walk out of darkness into true holiness. Any hope for a renewed land will come from God’s people walking in repentance. Renewal always begins with the people of God. But Christ has come to save the world.

Luke 1:39-56

Author: *Caleb Koornneef*

Have you ever walked into a situation and thought to yourself, "This is not going to be peaceful." For me, sometimes this happens when I see an entire bus full of middle school football players show up to Gangway for youth group. (I love their energy though!). Maybe for you it involves coming home to a stressful situation because of marriage, kids, finances, work, or any number of things. I would imagine that Mary experienced a little bit of that feeling when she relayed the message of her pregnancy to her parents, relatives, and future husband. It must have been incredibly difficult to maintain "peace" throughout her situation.

In Luke 1:39-45 we hear about Mary visiting her (much older) cousin Elizabeth who had also become pregnant by a miracle that was foretold by an angel. As they greet one another, Elizabeth shares her heart with Mary and says, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" What a good word for Mary to hear from someone whom she trusted and loved. To be "blessed" is more than just feeling good or having good things. In fact, many times, blessing can be found in the midst of pain and great hardship. The reason for this is because true peace and blessing is found in God and his promises.

Mary was in a tough situation, no doubt. But she could be called blessed because her peace was tethered not to the ups and downs of her life, but to the Lord and the fulfilment of His promises. She expresses this so beautifully in the next section of Luke 1:46-55. The peace she writes about is not self-glorification or a result of anything she has done. Rather, her soul magnifies the Lord because He has done great things.

About 30 or so years later, Jesus would teach about what it means to be blessed. You can read about it in Matthew 5. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven..." How can that be? It seems so upside down. The fact is, the kingdom Jesus is talking about cannot be found by seeking greatness or hoarding comfort and security or trying to stay ahead of the curve. It is offered freely through Christ's person and work for us on the cross. As we ponder that this Advent, may we be reminded of the ultimate lasting peace that caused the Apostle Paul to say, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

1 Samuel 8 & 16; 2 Samuel 7

Author: *Tim Sansbury*

I don't often think about the Bible as being funny, but 1 Samuel 8 is just funny. It's absurd. If you can, take the time to read it through, but the short version is Israel decides they want a king, and they go to Samuel to ask for one. Not so bad so far, except they aren't strong on diplomacy. They tell Samuel that they want a king not just because everyone else has one, but also because Samuel's sons are terrible judges. Shockingly, Samuel is not excited about their request.

Nevertheless, he goes to the Lord and asks about the people's request. Here's the fun. After God assures Samuel that the people are not rejecting Samuel, they are rejecting God, He instructs Samuel to do as the people request, but to warn them first about what the king will be like. Samuel obeys, and starting in verse 11 we hear the list of evils the king will bring, as Samuel relays it to the people of Israel. The king will steal their sons and send them off to war, use them as labor in the fields and for making weapons, take all the best of the people's farming, take their daughters for service as cooks and bakers, take a tenth of all of their food, produce, and flocks, and ultimately enslave them all. Samuel adds that in the end the people will cry out to God, but God will not listen because they were the ones who asked for all this.

Now stop a moment ... imagine you asked for a king. God said, "Sure, but you will hate it. And once you have one, there's no take backs." What's the next thing to do? That's right, ignore God and demand that king you've been warned about, while telling God how great it's going to be. That's exactly what God's people do in verses 19 and 20, and so God tells Samuel again to give them what they want. It would be comedy if it were not so tragic. And before you and I too quickly say, "Those dummies! Glad I am not like that..." How many of God's warnings have we ignored, even when God and his people have told us, "You're not going to like it if you do that..."? Ugh. Like the crowd before Samuel, we deserve the consequences of our sin, and deserve to have God ignore our cries when things go wrong.

But that is not what happens at all. It is true that King Saul and many—even most—of the kings of Israel were disasters who abused their power and their people. But God also raised up David from the people's sin, a king after God's own heart. And in David, he promised a future King who would be even greater. In advent, we look forward to that King coming to us, fulfilling a promise of a loving God who is gracious even when we foolishly and ridiculously ask him for pain and punishment by ignoring his Word. In this life, there is trouble, even trouble we have demanded from God. But in Christ, God has worked out salvation out of the fruit of our foolishness and sin and turned a comedic tragedy into a story of unimaginable Good News.

1 Kings 3:1-15; 1 Kings 8

Author: *Joel Satterly*

Often young couples have to negotiate holiday traditions. Reconciliation of different family practices can make Christmas a bit stressful. When Carol and I were first married, it quickly became apparent that we needed to discuss how to navigate Christmas. One thing that was very intimidating to me was that several members of her family, including and particularly her mom, were excellent gift givers. The gifts had meaning and connected the giver and the receiver. This was intimidating because I was not an adept gift-giver which only ramped up the pressure to not mess up.

King Solomon had a similar encounter of sorts. After reading the text, it is clear his experience had even higher stakes than a young husband trying to make his wife happy by fitting in with the in-laws. Solomon was offered the chance of a life time and he discovered that God is the perfect gift-giver. He not only meets our needs but He is also lavish – sparing nothing, not even His Son. 1 Kings 3 is the account of God coming to Solomon in a dream with this amazing offer: “Ask what I shall give you.” After some explanation, Solomon asked for wisdom. Actually he asked for “an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.” Upon reflection, Solomon’s request makes a ton of sense. Can you imagine how daunting a challenge it was to follow David? Solomon had a front row seat to the pressure of ruling Israel. He knew that this was a big job. His ask was rather practical and perhaps borne from his own experience.

The biblical narrative tells us that the Lord was pleased with Solomon’s request. In fact, God gives Solomon exactly what he asked for and then even more. The text tells us that God gave Solomon a wise and discerning mind but in a measure well beyond Solomon’s wildest dreams. He was given a wisdom such that “none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you.” And there is more ... God gave Solomon all the other stuff that he could have asked for – riches, fame, prestige, and honor. The pattern of God’s lavishness is highlighted again in 1 Kings 8. In this part of the story, the temple has been constructed and the trappings of the tabernacle are being relocated to the new temple with celebration and worship, including “sacrificing so many sheep and oxen that they could not be counted or numbered.” The people sought to be lavish according to the circumstance. Once everything was in order and the Ark of the Covenant placed in the most holy place and priests withdrew, God filled the place with himself in such a powerful way that the priests were overwhelmed. His presence was His gift.

In this advent season let us consider how God lavishly gives. He meets our needs. He gives more than we can ask. He offers His overwhelming presence and even makes a way for us to meet Him in the most Holy place by giving Jesus.

2 Chronicles 34

Author: *Sam Lamerson*

I still remember it like it was yesterday. I was seventeen, a sophomore in college and I was in an Old Testament survey class. Part of the class was studying all the kings of Israel (both united and divided kingdoms) for what was called "the dreaded kings test." It was during this time that I fell in love with Josiah, the boy king. In that class, on that day I said, "If I ever have a son, I'm naming him Josiah." Over ten years later my son was born—his name is Josiah. What was so great about Josiah? Many things, but the most important was his brave stand in favor of the destruction of idols. One of the greatest problems that ancient Israel faced was the encroachment of other groups and their gods. Israel, time after time, is warned about "following after other gods." Josiah becomes king when he is eight years old. During the temple repair the "book of the Law" was found and Josiah read it and began to destroy the idols and many of the idol worshipers. He realized that idolatry is a sin that God hates and that many of Israel's problems (exile, sinful kings, etc.) had idolatry at the root.

Josiah stood for reformation and godliness, even when it was dangerous to his reign and his safety. The birth of Christ reminds us that sometimes truth is not popular; not liked by the masses, and not helpful in one's social standing. Yet despite all of that, Josiah stood firm and Israel benefited from a leader who was willing to take an unpopular, yet truthful, stand. The birth of Jesus is also an act of reformation. Jesus comes into an Israel that was becoming more and more attracted to idols. He stands against the religious leaders of the day and speaks out against those who are attempting to "add to or take away" from the commands of God. Idolatry is not just a first-century problem. The evil one still roams around today, seeking to lead us into temptation. Our only hope is in the manger born child who was born to die and take the sins of the world onto his own shoulders. The church needs more people like Josiah. In a decade where we find serious ministerial misconduct virtually every week, we need Christians who are willing to stand up to things that are wrong, rather than attempt to justify sin. Josiah simply would not compromise despite outside pressure.

Josiah was not perfect, but the Christ Child was. We place our faith in Jesus, not Josiah, though Josiah gave us a great model. This Christmas think about the cost of standing against evil. It can be costly, but it is necessary. When I was young man (12 years old and up) my mother had a saying that I have never forgotten. Whenever she would send me out the door to go somewhere, she would proclaim, "Don' forget who you belong to!" I still try to live by these words. I belong to the Lord, the God who took on flesh to pay for my sin. I should not only conduct myself in a way that honors him, but should be willing to stand up and, in a gentle, godly manner, confront sin. The Lord took on flesh because he loved us. We must be willing to do our part to protect his name and the name of the church. I only ask that you act carefully, graciously, and kindly.

Isaiah 41:1-20; 44:21-28 & Isaiah 60Author: *David Bibee*

Have you ever walked into a situation and thought to yourself, "This is not going to be peaceful." For me, sometimes this happens when I see an entire bus full of middle school football players show up to Gangway for youth group. (I love their energy though!). Maybe for you it involves coming home to a stressful situation because of marriage, kids, finances, work, or any number of things. I would imagine that Mary experienced a little bit of that feeling when she relayed the message of her pregnancy to her parents, relatives, and future husband. It must have been incredibly difficult to maintain "peace" throughout her situation.

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About 30 or so years later, Jesus would teach about what it means to be blessed. You can read about it in Matthew 5. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven..." How can that be? It seems so upside down. The fact is, the kingdom Jesus is talking about cannot be found by seeking greatness or hoarding comfort and security or trying to stay ahead of the curve. It is offered freely through Christ's person and work for us on the cross. As we ponder that this Advent, may we be reminded of the ultimate lasting peace that caused the Apostle Paul to say, "I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength."

Jeremiah 31:1-34

Author: *David Bibee*

I heard a preacher once say that most Christians believe that God overpromised in the Old Testament, but underdelivered. I'll admit, that struck me as right. God speaks of Abraham's descendants becoming like the sands of the sea, yet God's people can't seem to make it more than a generation or two before everything collapses into idolatry. Certainly there were moments of great triumph—God's victory over Egypt, conquering the promised land as the sun stood still, etc. More often, it seems only a handful are saved when most of God's people go astray. It's easy to think that God overpromised and underdelivered. The old covenant was a time when God interacted with his people like a father telling stories to his children about his future plans around a campfire. The old covenant is "the evening" of history before "the morning." Hebrews tells us that "the law ha[d] but a shadow of the good things to come [but was not] the true form of these realities" (Heb. 10:1). The old covenant was the dress rehearsal. The tabernacle (and temple) was "a copy and shadow of the heavenly [one]" and Moses was commanded to build it "according to the pattern" that God showed to him (Heb. 8:5, cf. Ex. 25:9). The old covenant sacrifices were like children playing dress up, acting out the story of the redemption that was coming. The law is for children, Paul said, and functions like a tutor or guardian until a child comes of age (Gal. 3).

The time of the new covenant is when the sun rises, when the shadows become flesh and the promises are fulfilled. God didn't underdeliver in the old covenant. The new covenant is the fulfillment of every old covenant promise. Out of exile, a new covenant was coming when the law would be written upon their hearts. While they were once disobedient, God would make them to be faithful. Where their desires once led them astray, under the new covenant they would not stumble. In the new covenant, everyone would know the Lord, from the least to the greatest. In the new covenant sin would be removed forever, remembered by God no more.

The coming of Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises; the realization of every mystery. Christ's coming would render the old covenant "obsolete" (Heb. 8:13), not because the old covenant was bad, but because it had served its purpose. In Christ, the Lord has come in the flesh and made the true sacrifice that takes away sin forever (Heb. 9:12). Christ came into the world and the divided nations are made one and blessed in Him—"there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11). Under the old covenant, God's presence was hidden behind the curtain. In the new covenant, God hides his presence within us; united fully to God in Christ. Christ came into the world saying, "The time is fulfilled" and the calendars changed to reflect "the Year of our Lord." This Advent, may we not discount what God has done in Christ. The dwelling place of God is with man. He knows us and we know him. And he is powerful to make us a holy and faithful people.

Isaiah 11:1-11 & Isaiah 42

Author: *David Bibee*

I once bought a bonsai tree from a man selling them on the side of the road (your intuitions are correct – it would not work out). Growing bonsai trees has always fascinated me as a rather beautiful example of humanity cultivating the earth. Sadly, this would not be one of those instances. I had a good run, but eventually it started to die. It had been planted in the wrong soil, so branch by branch, lush green became brittle brown.

This is what God says Israel had become. Righteous men are like trees planted by living water and yield fruit (Psa. 1), but God says of his people, there are “no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered” (Jer. 8:13). Israel is like a once fruitful tree becoming nothing but a dead stump. Yet, unlike my bonsai, God intended to resurrect Israel from the dead. Isaiah 11 and 42 together help us to see the scope of God’s redemptive plans. God’s plans have always been global from the moment he created the good world, and God’s people were chosen for the sake of the world.

Although they had been faithless and had become a lifeless branch, God promised through Isaiah that a King from the line of David was coming. Upon him would be the Spirit of the Lord – “The Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:2). He would be a greater Solomon with perfect wisdom to discern between good and evil. He would be the greater and Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), taking dominion over the animals and peace between wolves and lambs. He would take dominion over all the world, rising up as a sign calling out to every nation: “In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples – of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious” (Isa. 11:10).

Far from being a “heavenly” gospel, the prophets foresaw that the reign of the Messiah would result in the transformation of the world. What an encouragement it must have been. The coming Christ would be the dawning of the world’s light – light that brings light to all men (John 1:9), a light of salvation for gentiles (Luke 2:32), and the light of all the world (John 8:12). And at the coming of the Lord’s anointed, all the nations will be drawn together under his banner, as the whole earth is brought to worship him (Isa. 42:10-13).

This Advent, may we trust that God will bring forth justice and will never tire until it is done. In Christ, God is making all things new; until his will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Luke 2:1-14

Author: *Caleb Koornneef*

One of my daughter's favorite things to do is check for mail. She's only 18 months old, but I will often ask her, "do you want to go check for mail?" Immediately, her face lights up with a big smile and she runs to the door with anticipation. The keys will jingle together as we make our way down the hallway to our mailbox outside of our apartment. Some days, she spends nearly 20 minutes trying to open all the mailboxes. It is remarkable how fun getting junk mail has been because of her anticipation, hope, and joy!

Joy is a powerful and desirable thing, but it is only as lasting as the object in which it is rooted. We look for joy and happiness in a lot of places. Some look for possessions, experiences, money, stability, recognition, career, family, or even involvement in church. I cannot help but think to myself, "Are these things really it?"

Scripture tells us that over 2000 years ago, in the lowliest places to the lowliest people, "good news of great joy" appeared. Christ was born! What may not have looked like much, was in fact the King of kings and Lord of lords stepping into humanity in order to bring about a kingdom that was worth more than all this world has to offer. He draws near, not in pomp and circumstance, but in your average stable to everyday people. It must have seemed bizarre - shepherds running around at night telling people about the host of singing angels or proclaiming that the Savior of humanity was born in a stable in Bethlehem. But the good news which they received from heaven caused great joy because it was rooted in the promises of God. There is nothing greater than the joy of our salvation which is Christ Himself.

One day, my daughter will get bored of fetching the mail and she will want to trade the joy of jingly mail keys for some fancier car keys. We too may get tired of our current circumstances and want the next best thing, but as we ponder our source of joy on this third Sunday of Advent, may we be caught up in true and lasting joy of our salvation: that Jesus was born to save us; He died to save us; He rose to save us; He reigns to save us, and He is coming again to save us and bring us home. Surely, that is good news of great joy!

Isaiah 9:1-7 & Luke 1:46-56

Author: *David Bibee*

My father died a few months ago. In bright contrast, my wife will have our first child a few months from now. Needless to say, a lot has been on my mind. How am I supposed to be a father without being able to talk to my own father? What does it mean to pass down his name and legacy? How will I ever be able to remember all that he taught me?

Our life is but a vapor, burnt up like grass or a flower that quickly withers. Life is also mundane. Much of our time is spent doing ordinary, unremarkable things. Moments fly by unnoticed. Memories fade without recall. But in Christ we take our place in God's great legacy.

Since the fall of humanity, God's people have waited. To Eve was promised a son who would crush the serpent (Gen. 3:15). When Cain was born, Eve praised God, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord," no doubt thinking he was the son to come (Gen. 4:1). Lamech held Noah, hoping, "[T]his one will bring us relief" (Gen. 5:29). To Abraham was promised a land, but he would never see it, nor his descendants for four hundred years (Gen. 15:13). To David was promised an eternal throne for his son (1 Sam. 7).

God is eternal—beyond time—but we are not. God never changes, never sleeps, never lacks. We are finite and limited by time and resources. In every generation, we are required to pass down God's promises and the task he set before us to our children. In many cases, the biblical story shows us how God's people constantly fail to do this or forget. Yet God is the great bridge between all generations. He is the one who promises to be faithful unto a thousand generations and sets before us a task that will take as long.

But through all the waiting, God had made the barren fruitful, and now, through the virgin, the Son would be born "in remembrance of [God's] mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever" (Luke 1:54-55). With the coming of Christ, we see all the threads of the biblical narrative come together. Jesus came in order to redeem us from sin which came through Adam, to crush the serpent who deceived Eve, to reunite the nations that were separated in the time of Abraham, and to take David's throne. Christ came in order that justice would be established upon the earth; "the increase of his kingdom and of peace" will never end (Isa. 9:7).

In Christ, God connects us to a greater legacy—God's own story. He unites us, one generation to the next, because we're all united to Christ. Cultivating the earth and making disciples of all nations will take some time—perhaps a thousand generations more. Because he is the faithful, eternal one, we can have confidence he will accomplish the tasks he sets out for us.

Isaiah 35 & Luke 3

Author: *Robbie Crouse*

Death Valley in the Mojave Desert of California is the lowest place in North America and also the hottest place on earth, often recording temperatures in the 120s Fahrenheit. It averages only an inch of rainfall annually and can sometimes go years without any moisture. However, every so often Death Valley receives moderate rainfall and what occurs is called a “superbloom.” Almost immediately wildflowers spring up and a colorful landscape transforms the normally barren desert floor. It is considered one of earth’s greatest ecological wonders.

Something like this is the picture Isaiah gives us in Isaiah 35. Much of his book is a bleak judgment against the sins of God’s covenant people, Israel. Isaiah uses natural imagery to describe their sin and spiritual condition. The Lord has given them the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. This gift hearkens back to God’s original paradise of Eden. But Israel’s sin and rebellion had turned paradise into a barren wasteland. The people’s hearts were like a hard, lifeless desert—stony and unreceptive to God’s grace. As a result, the Lord was sending His people into exile to the east in Assyria and Babylon. They would be captives and prisoners, led away from their homeland. The Promised Land itself would lay barren. To make matters worse, their captors would put out the eyes of their captives and lead them blind to their captivity. That’s the bad news of Isaiah. Sin has consequences.

But the good news is that God would redeem His people and this redemption would look like a reversal of everything that went before. The wilderness caused by Israel’s sin would be transformed into a fertile land once more—paradise restored. God is going to cause a “superbloom” in the equivalent of Death Valley. The Lord would lead His people back from their captivity, and He would heal all their wounds. God’s people themselves would bear fruit again, the spiritual fruit of righteous living.

This prophetic promise surely gave Israel hope in their exile, but at the same time their return from exile to their homeland didn’t seem to fulfill this promise fully. It was glorious to return, but their spiritual state still often remained a kind of Death Valley. It’s into this scene that we open the Gospels and see John the Baptist, the prophet crying out in the wilderness. John is calling for the same thing that Isaiah prophesied. He is calling for repentance and the fruit of repentance in faith and righteousness. But how will Death Valley get its superbloom? What will it look like when it happens?

It happens when a thirty-year-old man of Nazareth, Jesus the Son of God, comes forth to be baptized in the wilderness. As the water is poured out on Jesus, the heavens above open and God’s own Spirit is poured out. This is God showering His grace. His Son is the lily of the valley, the rose of Sharon, who comes to make the desert into paradise. By His righteous life and sacrificial death, by His resurrection and ascension on high, Jesus pours out the blessing of God upon undeserving sinners. This Advent season consider what parts of your life are a “desert” in need of the waters of life. Ask God to pour out the Spirit of His Son on you afresh. Remember your baptism, and watch God make a superbloom of Death Valley.

Isaiah 61 & Luke 4

Author: *David Bibee*

When Paul recounted the story of the fall, he says simply, “[S]in came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). Because Adam failed to keep the garden—to stomp the serpent and protect Eve—all the world’s corruption has arisen. Adam is the root of humanity and through Adam all humanity was brought under sin’s dominion. Now the earth gives forth thorns and is “subjected to futility” (Rom. 8:20). Now, Adam’s children are born “children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3).

Jesus is the new and greater Adam. Jesus is true Man. Jesus is the model, the genuine article. Jesus is an example of humanity as it is supposed to be. As the new and greater Adam—Son of God and Son of Man—Christ came to restore and renew everything that fell in the first Adam.

In order to restore what fell in Adam, Christ first faces Adam’s test. Adam was defeated by Satan in the garden, walking beside still waters and well fed. Jesus defeats Satan in the wilderness among the thorns, starving without food and water. Adam obeys the counsel of the serpent and is banished from God’s presence. Jesus recites the words of his Father against devil’s lies, sending Satan fleeing from his presence. Adam left the garden in shame. Jesus left the wilderness in the power of the Spirit to heal the sick, cast out demons, forgive sins, and raise the dead.

The coming of Christ means that God has come to make all things new. He came to cleanse lepers, to bind up the weary, to “proclaim good news to the poor.” Because the Spirit was upon him, the blind would receive sight and those enslaved by sin were freed in his presence (Luke 4:18). Demons and hypocrites would tremble, enraged but impotent against him. But those who called upon his name, or even touched the hem of his garment, would be redeemed. Where Adam walked, thorns came up, but where Christ walks “righteousness and praise [will] sprout up before all nations” just as “earth brings forth its sprouts” (Isa. 61:11).

In Christ, you can experience the year of the Lord’s favor, freedom, and healing. In Christ, your life can be made to be a garden, flourishing with righteousness, goodness, and truth. The Anointed One anoints us with oil of gladness instead of mourning” and clothes us with a “garment of praise instead of a faint spirit” (Isa. 61:3). This Advent, may you hear the Lord’s promises: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news” (Luke 4:18). Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

Isaiah 65 & Luke 7

Author: *Sam Lamerson*

When I was 11 years old, I desperately wanted a train set for Christmas. As the gifts began to be opened, I noticed that there were not any boxes that looked big enough for a train. After all the presents had been opened, I felt very disappointed. Then my dad said, "Oh, I forgot that there was one more present." It was the train! I still have that train and every time we put it around the Christmas tree, I remember much disappointment comes from impatience. We want God to deliver in 30 minutes or less and we want it our way. God, on the other hand, has a perfect time for everything and sometimes we need to learn to wait.

Near the end of Luke 7 we read the story of the disappointment of John the Baptist. He knows what Jesus has been doing and it does not seem to match up with his expectation. Isa. 65 speaks of the Lord destroying his enemies, yet Jesus seems to be doing none of that. John then sends his people (he is in prison) to ask if Jesus is the one (Messiah) or should we wait for someone else? John sits in prison disappointed that God is not doing what he wants and anticipates...

John expected God to destroy his enemies, yet Jesus came offering forgiveness. Very often, just like John, our disappointment with God comes from our own mistaken expectations. God does not promise us a perfect life here, but he promises us that a new world is coming in which there will be no more pain, death, sin, or disappointment. We are all waiting for that new world.

Christmastime can cause us to be more introspective than usual. This often leads to memories of those who have disappointed us or times when life does not seem to be fair. I teach my students that this is a "short-term attitude." Taking the long, eternal look reminds us that the troubles that we face now are but a blip on the screen in light of eternity.

Notice that Jesus answers John's followers in language from Isaiah. He is reminding John that we should base our expectations on the Scripture, not on our desires. There will come ultimate healing—it just may not come at the time you desire. Jesus is doing what the Messiah, according to Isaiah, should do. The blind see, the lame walk, and the poor have good news preached to them.

I know that many of you who are reading this have had a life filled with many disappointments. I have had my share, but God has always been faithful. Perhaps the Lord is teaching patience or reminding us to pray for others when they face problems in their lives. Whatever the case, please remember that in the end, everything turns out well.

In the words of a hobbit, "Everything bad is going to come undone." That is the promise of Jesus and it is a promise that we can trust. It might not be tomorrow, but it will be. The Christ-child was born to put everything right. I long for that day, but for now I trust in the grace of our Lord and the goodness of the Father. Problems are not forever.

Isaiah 25 & Luke 8:22-56

Author: *Robbie Crouse*

Death is a sad but frequent theme in the Book of Isaiah. God's people Israel have turned aside from the God of life and the sad result is death. God's judgment on Israel is to exile them from their homeland to foreign enemies. They will lose the temple, their city Jerusalem, and their own monarchy. They will be under the foreign rule of empires. Isaiah's picture for all this is death. Israel is going to have to die and somehow be resurrected from their spiritual death.

That sets the scene for what we see in Isaiah 25. The light in the darkness is that God will rebuild the ruins. While Israel could not escape the sword from invading Babylon, the Lord will restore their fortunes and come to the aid of His people. He will set them free and become their stronghold once more. But even more than that, Isaiah gives us a picture of a feast. There will be eating and drinking...

Earlier in Isaiah feasting and drinking has been described in negative terms. God's people have become drunkards and the wealthy are neglecting their poor as they eat their rich portions of food. But here God Himself gives a feast, and it is a feast for all people. It is not a sinful indulgence or debauched revelry, but festivity of righteous joy! The reason for this holy feasting is that God Himself is eating something: "He will swallow up death forever!" While God's people were indulging sinfully and deserve death, God rather will eat death up on their behalf so that they can eat and drink to life. God is the true death eater. By His act of consuming death, His people will have life.

All this is seen concretely in the incarnate life of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Here in Luke 8 Jesus calms a chaotic storm that threatens to send the disciples down to death. Jesus has command over this chaos and threats of death. As soon as Jesus calms this natural storm, He encounters a human storm of man: a demoniac possessed with a legion of demons who lives in the tombs. This man is a kind of living death. But Jesus has power of this as well. Pigs die so that this man can live free of demonic powers of death. The scene after this continues to show Jesus as swallowing up the power of death. He heals a woman who is living in a state of symbolic death—ceremonial uncleanness—by transferring His healing power to her broken body. Immediately after, Jesus raises a little girl from her literal death. To Jesus, death is no more than a sleep—"Do not weep, for she is not dead but sleeping." Again, with a touch, Jesus brings the power of His life to bear on death. "Child, arise." This is a mini-resurrection.

It's significant that the result of this resurrection from death is that this little girl is told to eat: "And he directed that something should be given her to eat." Jesus has swallowed up death, and the result is that His people can joyously partake of life. Those who have died and been resurrected with Jesus get to feast. This Advent time, as you look ahead to a Christmas feast and even get to partake of the "goodies" of the season, remember that the reason you can do this is that God swallowed up death on your behalf. You deserved to die in your sins, but God ate death for you. This is not a reason to indulge selfishly, but it does mean that you can rejoice with others in the good food that God provides. "Let us be glad and rejoice in His salvation!"

Jeremiah 23:1-6; Luke 11

Author: *Scott Manor*

Years ago, on a vacation in Scotland, my wife and I found ourselves on the Isle of Skye, a beautiful, remote place with more sheep than people, where the land suddenly ends in a sheer cliff high above the rocky shore below. One time, I noticed a sheep which had somehow gotten itself stuck on a very small ledge about halfway down the 200-foot cliff. There it was, eating what little bit of grass or moss it could find, and completely stuck! As I looked around, I saw dozens more sheep all over the place, getting themselves into all sorts of trouble. Where was the shepherd?!

With shepherds like that one, who needs wolves? That's the gist of the opening lines in Jeremiah 23, which comes out swinging, "Woe to the shepherds" of God's people. As the religious and political leaders of the day, these shepherds didn't just ignore the call to attend to God's flock, they proactively drove them away. God wasn't going to let that continue.

In fact, just a few verses later, things turn hopeful when we see God Himself coming in as the Good Shepherd. He loves His flock, gathers them back, and takes away their fear and dismay. He will not only set His shepherds to care for them, but there is also a promise of a King who will deliver God's people and provide security.

Fast forward to Luke 11 and we see aspects of fulfillment of these promises in Jeremiah 23. As a loving Shepherd, Jesus teaches His disciples how to pray (vv. 2-4), leading them into the shelter of the Father's provision, authority, care, and forgiveness. As to the expectation of a King, we see His authority over demons (v. 14), the establishment of the kingdom of God (v.20), and His identical condemnation of the Pharisees who were failing in their role as shepherds (vv.42-44). Three times Jesus repeats the same judgment: "Woe to you!" for neglecting justice, the love of God, and care for others.

But Luke 11 doesn't fulfill all the expectations of Jeremiah 23. We see the Good Shepherd attending to his flock, caring for them, exercising authority, establishing His kingdom, and dealing wisely with others, but where is the execution of justice and righteousness promised? Who is going to provide salvation and fulfill Jeremiah's words? Who is going to deal with those selfish shepherds and phony pharisees once and for all?

The disciples and Pharisees didn't recognize it, but it's right there in Jeremiah 23:6 – "The Lord is our righteousness." Truth is, we're all phony pharisees and selfish shepherds. On our own, there is nothing righteous within us at all, and we are the ones who deserve God's execution of justice. Nevertheless, the Good Shepherd takes the justice we deserve and gives us His righteousness in its place.

I don't care what you asked for this Christmas, that is the greatest gift any of us will ever receive.

Luke 2:21-35

Author: *Brian Vidal*

Advent is the time of waiting and God's people are always required to be patient. Israel had labored in exile, but God restored them to the land. The temple had been rebuilt, but it was nothing compared to Solomon's. God had promised an eternal king and a day when the nations would be joined together, yet they were ruled by pagan emperors. By the time Jesus was born, four hundred years had gone by without God speaking once through a prophet. It was a time that required faithful patience.

Simeon is the perfect figure to consider during Advent. God had promised him that "he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ." The end of Simeon's wait meant the end of all waiting. The child promised to Eve was here. The son promised to Abraham had arrived. The reign of the son promised to David was upon them.

Long before that day at the Temple, God had made covenant with his people and had given them the law. As God's priestly people and his treasured possession in all the earth, God commanded his people to keep in obedience with his law. A central command was for male children to be circumcised on the eighth day. Circumcision is a ritual renunciation of the flesh. The promised son Isaac was not born until after Abraham was circumcised—only God can bring life out of death. Circumcision was given to mark God's people, but also to foreshadow that one day the Savior would bear our sin away, shedding the blood that would provide our cleansing.

As Mary and Joseph present Jesus at the temple to be marked as one of God's own people, Simeon sees that Jesus is much more: "[M]y eyes have seen your salvation... a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel." Jesus is not merely a son of Abraham to be marked, but the Son. And as Abraham had offered up his beloved son, Christ's sacrifice is foreshadowed in his circumcision as well. Through Simeon God announces Jesus as salvation incarnate, and it is salvation for the Jews and for the Gentiles also. Through Abraham's seed all the nations were blessed and on that day, Simeon held the blessing in his arms.

Jesus is the one who came to fulfill every promise of God and will come again in glory. But Simeon warns that, "This child is appointed for the fall and rising of many." Christ came in order that "our hearts will be revealed." Do our hearts and lives reflect humble obedience to God's word?

When preparing to celebrate the coming of Christ this Christmas, may we all seek the Lord with a renewed faith and confidence in God's promises. Let us rejoice that unto us a child has been born, a child whom is called Jesus - God saves!

Malachi 4 & Luke 13

Author: *David Bibee*

The modern west has made an idol out of niceness. Unsurprisingly, the Church in the modern has dressed Jesus up in garbs of niceness, clothing him in our sensibilities. But we must be careful to seek God as he is, not as we would like him to be. We are to be shaped into his image, not to shape him into ours. Under the old covenant, God sent angels of death to destroy his enemies (2 Sam. 24:15-16; 2 Kng. 19:35). Jesus is not a different God—he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob come in the flesh. It may surprise you that Jesus also sends his Spirit to stop hearts (Acts 5:1-11) and angels to kill kings in the new covenant as well (Acts 12:21-23). The psalmist warns the rulers of the world, “Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him” (Psa. 2:12).

Wicked rulers corrupt the place they rule. Where these evil ones have sway, influencing a people, evil and corruption spread everywhere. While our tendencies toward niceness make this painful to acknowledge, justice and righteousness can only thrive when evil is dealt with. Malachi speaks of Christ’s coming as “the great and awesome day of the Lord” where the wicked would be confronted (Mal. 4:5)

God is holy. His love of good is matched by a hatred of evil. He is not casual about those who destroy the innocent, pervert right worship, or pollute the land with abominations. He is the avenger of spilled blood. There is mercy in repentance, but judgment in high-handed disobedience. There is kindness for the contrite, but wrath for the wicked. There is resurrection and life, but also death.

Despite all of God’s promises and faithfulness through the ages, when Christ came upon his temple, he found a fruitless tree. The house of the Lord was to be a house of prayer for all the nations, but instead they had made it a den of robbers (Luke 19:46). Demons roamed their synagogues and their teachers rebuked Christ for healing (Luke 13:15-16). The city of peace and the footstool of God’s throne had become “the city that kills the prophets,” which would kill him too (Luke 13:33-35). But the result of the judgment would be the establishment of the kingdom.

The fruitless temple was torn down in order that a new temple—a living temple—would be established upon Christ (1 Pet. 2:6-7). The barren fig tree that was torn down and replaced by the mustard seed of the kingdom that would grow to give shade to all (Luke 13:18-19).

This Advent, may we look to our lives with fear and trembling, not shying away from the reality of sin. In Christ, our sin has been judged and destroyed, killed in his body on the Cross. Let us live as those dead to sin, bearing fruit in keeping with repentance. May we plant our lives firmly upon his word, lest we too be swept away.

Isaiah 55 & Luke 14

Author: *Sam Lamerson*

Because I am a serious introvert, I am not a big fan of banquets. The noise, the crush of people, and the constant talking cause me to need to come home and sit alone for an hour or so after I have been to an event. There is one banquet, however, that I am thrilled to be able to attend.

In Luke 7 Jesus tells the story of the great banquet of God. Notice that the parable tells us that a good many people whom we expect may not be there. On the other hand, lots of those whom we did not expect will be in attendance.

The gospel is good news for those who are outsiders—the poor, the weak, the ill, and those whom most of society looks down upon. There will be former prostitutes, thieves, murderers, and even those (like Paul) who once fought against the Gospel. Jesus offers forgiveness to those whom most of society cares little about and warns those of high stature to be careful because their tickets may be fake.

This parable reminds us that the grace of God is not for those who think highly of themselves. It is not for those who believe that they are self-sufficient. It is not for those who think that “they are not that bad.” Charles Spurgeon said, “There is nothing that will keep a person from coming to Christ like a good opinion of themselves.” The gospel is about having a high opinion of Jesus and not ourselves.

The banquet is for those who know that they are broken; that they are sinful, and in desperate need of God’s grace. The attendees at this meal know the significance of God’s grace and know that they will be miserable without it.

Some of you reading this may think that God invites us because of our good works, our giving of money, or our work for the church. Jesus says that we are invited because of God’s great and kind nature; because of his love for the downtrodden; because of his desire to bless the outsiders. We all need to realize that entrance to the kingdom is not because of our own merit, but because of his; not because of our own good works, but because of his perfect life; not because of our own goodness, but because of Jesus’ death on the cross.

Are you ready for the banquet? There are lots of “big meals” this time of the year, but none of them compare to the great “dinner of God.” Do you have an invitation? Tickets are not free, but have been paid for by the God of the universe and are available to those who believe.

I want to be a juggler at that banquet. I sometimes think of myself as a “jester for the King” and can’t wait to attend. I hope I’ll see you there. Do me a favor and bring someone with you.

Ezekiel 34:1-6, 11-16 & Luke 15Author: *Caleb Koornneef*

When is the last time you read from the book of Ezekiel? It is an interesting book of the Bible – an amazing book, really. Ezekiel’s context is that the Israelites broke faith with God and were taken into exile as a result. Israel was in living in rebellion to God and his holiness, only concerned with their own glory among the nations. So Ezekiel was a prophet-priest who spoke God’s oracles to a wayward people in the midst of confusion, exile and lostness.

One of the interesting key themes of Ezekiel’s message is that God brings about His salvation through judgment. In chapter 19 for instance, the corrupt “princes of Israel” are condemned, but there is the promise of hope that one day a true and better Prince would rule with justice (Ez. 34:24). In chapter 34, the wicked shepherd-leaders of Israel are scattered, but God promises to gather His sheep to Himself and to be their Shepherd. Jesus also illustrates this in Luke 15 through the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and of course the prodigal son.

I don’t know about you, but I was raised with a pretty good understanding of the meaning of “thriftiness.” My family didn’t spend a lot of money on things unless we needed them. We are the type of people that wait till the movie comes out on DVD rather than seeing it in the theater. We are packed-lunch people, we maximize reward points for gas, food, and other such things. We are not poor, just Dutch.

Despite my thriftiness, I thought about Luke 15 in the context of my own life. If I had a 100 sheep and lost one, I would cut my losses. If I had ten coins and misplaced one of them, I would probably look for a little bit, but move on. If I was the father of a prodigal son (or daughter), it would be hard for me to run out and meet my child, much less throw a feast in their honor after they squandered all I had given them.

Thankfully, I am not God and He is not me. He is a good Shepherd who gathers the lost sheep, who finds the lost coin, who welcomes the wayward child home. You might say to yourself, “I’m unworthy! I don’t deserve to be found.” That is true. But the reason such unholy people can be reconciled to a holy God is not because of their merit or because God looks the other way or because He sweeps their sin under the rug. It is wholly and entirely because of His mercy and grace. Through Christ, God is both just and the justifier of the ungodly (Rom. 3:26). He judges Jesus in our place and offers us free grace instead. That is why Jesus came.

Isaiah 57:14-21 & Luke 18:1-17

Author: Joel Satterly

It seems that there is no shortage of Christmas movies and the breadth of film expands across virtually all categories. There are comedies, dramas, animation, pithy feel-good sagas, and there is even debate about what makes a movie a "Christmas movie." However, regardless of genre or release date, virtually all Christmas movies share a common theme - hope. Perhaps this reality is not always evident, but this is part of the magic of Christmas cinema. Those of us in Christ we need not look too deeply to see it nor are we surprised, for we know that Jesus is the hope of the world and Christmas marks the coming of the day of the Lord.

That which is evident in film can be readily seen in the scriptures. Even a cursory look reveals this notion of hope and a more careful reading, particularly advent passages, leads us to the richness of the season, the coming of the Christ to take away the sins of the world. For example, in Isaiah 57 we read this proclamation from the "One who is high and lifted up; who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of contrite and lowly spirit.'" In this passage, God promises healing, peace, and restoration for those lowly and contrite.

Perhaps one wonders who is lowly and contrite? To whom is the prophet writing? The good news is that we need not wonder, for Jesus provides clarity. Sometimes He does so directly and in other instances He speaks more symbolically. Regardless, Jesus reminds us that He came into this world for a purpose. He came to bring about the Kingdom of God. He came to reconcile us to the Father, fulfilling promises of Isaiah 57.

Luke 18:1-17 is such a passage. In it, Jesus identifies that He came to redeem those without regard. The kingdom of God is for those who are lowly and contrite - sinners, widows, and children. In these verses Jesus uses two parables and a hands-on learning experience to illustrate His point. First, He tells a story about a persistent widow seeking justice. Jesus identifies the widow as one of His chosen ones and promises justice from His own hand. This is hope.

Second, Jesus speaks of two men going to the temple to pray. One, a religious man, sought self-justification and the other, a tax collector, cried out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." So that we wouldn't miss the point, Jesus said that the second man went home justified, "the one who humbles himself will be exalted." This is hope.

Lastly, Jesus invited children to come near him. His disciples rebuke the parents; presumably they were trying to protect Jesus' time, to keep Him on agenda, and make sure He was dealing with important stuff. Instead, Jesus told them to let the children come, "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." This is simple and this is hope.

The coming of the day of the Lord - this is hope.

Daniel 7:13-14 & Luke 18:31-34

Author: *David Bibee*

The Bible begins with humanity receiving dominion over all the earth and all the creatures that God has made. Throughout the Bible, men who tend animals or work as shepherds become rulers and kings. Noah has control over the animals at the time of the flood and becomes the father of a new humanity. Moses becomes a shepherd before he becomes the Lord's prophet and Israel's ruler. David kills bears and lions protecting his flock before becoming Israel's greatest king.

It should be unsurprising that the coming King is described as a beast conqueror. Daniel sees visions of empires and wicked kings, They had the appearance of lions with wings, bears tearing flesh, and beasts with four heads and ten heads (Dan. 7:3-7). These empires would rule and ravage God's people until the kingdom of God would be established—"Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13-14).

When Jesus was born, angels testified that the "Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). When he cast out demons Jesus declared, "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Luke 11:20). And when Jesus entered Jerusalem for the last time before his crucifixion, he told his disciples, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished" (Luke 18:31).

The pharisees and priests were robbers and liars, hired hands that cared nothing for the sheep (the people). They would seek to kill Jesus, doing the will of the great dragon, but the result would be their undoing. For Christ would rise to the right hand of God's throne and would reign until "all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him." As Peter proclaimed under tongues of the Spirit's fire on Pentecost, "The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.' Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." (Acts 2:34-35). You have killed him, but God made him King and the name above all names, that at his name every knee will bow (Phil. 2).

This Advent we do not wait the dawning of Christ's kingdom, but live under his reign. Though the world appears powerful in evil, Christ has "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matt. 28:18). Hell's gates appear strong, but one day all his enemies will be his footstool.

Joel 2 & Luke 24:44-48

Author: *Andrew Siegenthaler*

Allison and I once knew a couple who were both WWII veterans. He served in the US Army and she was a WAC. They met while stationed in England, fell in love, and got married after the war. We asked them why they talked about that time as if it were the best years of their lives. They said it was because England was filled with young people from all over the free world, fighting on the right side of the greatest war in history, ready and willing to make the ultimate sacrifice. That sense of being part of something bigger than themselves shaped the rest of their lives.

As human beings we've been made in such a way that when we are connected to something bigger than ourselves—that's when we're truly happy. That's what God wants for us. He doesn't want us to fritter away our lives with mundane things. He doesn't want us to make the acquisition of wealth or retiring to Florida the goal of our lives. He wants us to be a part of something big, and he offers us that opportunity if we will take it.

In Joel 2, the Lord tells Israel he has a blessing for them. It might not come in their generation, but it's coming. The blessing is: I'm going to pour out my Holy Spirit on you. And when that happens, you will all become prophets.

What was the primary role of the Old Testament prophets? It wasn't to tell the future, though they did that. Their main job was preaching the Gospel. God loves you and he offers you forgiveness and life if you repent and believe. He's going to accomplish salvation through the Messiah who is to come. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved! Joel says one day all God's people will be prophets. Boys and girls, men and women, young and old—all will prophesy the Gospel.

What about these accompanying signs? Blood and fire and billows of smoke, the sun turned to darkness, the moon to blood? It's prophetic symbolism that the world will be turned upside down by the Gospel. Things will be shaken. And this shaking will pave the way for the day of the Lord. The return of the king. The second coming of Jesus Christ.

As a Christian you are on the right side of the greatest war in history. The war between the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light. As a Christian you get to liberate people from hell through the Gospel. The Holy Spirit makes you a prophet in your home, your neighborhood, and your workplace as you share your hope in Jesus Christ. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit's power was unleashed on this world, and ever since then the kingdom of Jesus Christ has been advancing. Despite setbacks and opposition and failures of every kind, it's advancing—and we get to be part of it!

You can have the Hope of Heaven this Christmas!

Heaven is a free gift.

The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23

We are sinners and cannot save ourselves.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Romans 3:23

On the one hand, *God is love.* I John 4:8b

But on the other hand, *He does not leave the guilty unpunished.* Exodus 34:7b

God solved this problem by sending His son, Jesus.

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life John 3:16

You receive the gift of heaven by faith.

Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.

Acts 16:31

If this is what you want, you can pray right now:

"Dear Jesus, forgive my sin, and come into my life as my Lord Savior. Thank you for giving me the hope of heaven both now and forever. Amen."

This is the promise of Jesus, *He who believes has everlasting life.* John 6:47b

Welcome to the Family of God!



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