

History of Advent

Today is the first Sunday of Advent for 2021. The Advent season comprises the four weeks before Christmas. In the 3rd century, the Roman Empire, which at the time had not adopted Christianity, celebrated the rebirth of the Unconquered Sun or (Sol Invictus) on December 25th. The days would now lengthen to the zenith in June. While the Romans and the world celebrated the pagan rituals of the winter solstice, the early church chose to change the focus from the sun god to that of the birth of Christ, the Son of God, in 336 A.D. The early church tradition, not found in the Scriptures, believed the vernal equinox was the date when Mary, by the power the Holy Spirit, conceived Jesus and December 25th was 9 months following the conception. It was not originally called Christmas but Feast of the Annunciation. The first recorded use of the word “Christmas” was in 1038 as Christ’s Mass was combined and shorten to “Christmas”. Since the shepherds were in the fields with the sheep when they we told of Christ’s birth, this would give credence to Jesus being born in the late Spring to early Fall. The church took a celebration of the Roman sun god and the world’s celebration of the winter solstice and created a celebration to refocused the world on Christ.

To counter the Church’s effort to bring the world’s focus back to Christ, Satan worked hard to corrupt Christmas. Satan desires to have people focus on anything but Christ and has worked to make Christmas into a celebration of Santa Clause, magic, the receiving of gifts and the largest selling season in America. Sometimes it seems like a trout swimming upstream as the church works to use this time of year to draw the world’s focus back to Christ, but that is our mission and Advent is one effort to do just that.

Advent is a time when Christians prepare their hearts and minds for the coming of God’s Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. The word “Advent” means “to come,” and the Advent

season focuses both on remembering Christ's first coming; His birth as both God and man, and also anticipating Christ's second coming and soon return.

This Advent season we will focus on both Christ's first coming and His future coming with a series of messages exploring the various themes represented by the five candles on the Advent Wreath. Although candles have been used in churches for a long time, especially before electricity, the Advent Wreath is a fairly recent tradition in church history. The first Advent Wreath was invented by a German pastor back in 1839. He made it out of an old cart wheel he had lying around. It actually had twenty-eight candles; twenty-four small red candles around the rim interspersed with four larger white candles. The pastor devised the wreath to satisfy the children at the mission school who would ask every day, "Is it Christmas yet?" With the cart wreath they would light a new red candle each day to help them count the days until Christmas. The larger white candles were lit on Sundays.

As the tradition spread in churches the smaller candles were discarded in favor of a wreath with just the four larger candles and a fifth candle in the center. Many families still use an Advent Calendar in their homes to help their children count off the days until Christmas. With the Advent wreath, four outside candles are lit on each successive Sunday of Advent while the center candle is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Sunday. The accepted theme of the Advent Candles is the first candle represents hope, the second candle peace, the third candle joy and the fourth candle love. The fifth and center candle represents Christ. Even though the Advent Wreath is a fairly new tradition when one looks at the history of the church, these themes of hope, peace, joy and love stretch all the way back to the first Christmas and beyond. They are deeply rooted in Scripture, and so it is very appropriate that we take some time this Advent season to reflect on these various themes in light of Scripture and the Christmas story of Christ's birth.

First Advent Candle

The first candle represents hope, and so today we will examine how hope in Christ relates to the Advent and Christmas and to our own lives. We will explore a variety of Scriptures throughout the message, but we will begin with this passage of hope fulfilled from Matthew chapter 1, reading at verse 21, where the angel tells Joseph, Mary “ ‘will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ”²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: *Quoting Isaiah chapter 7, verse 14.* ²³ ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.’ ” Jesus brought hope for He would save people from their sins and His name “Immanuel” meant “God is with us” for He is the Savior of mankind.

So, the first Advent candle represents the hope found in Christ and it lit here on the altar. Hope is an important theme relating to Christmas, and especially relating to the Advent season leading up to Christmas. Our world is in desperate need of hope. Many people today live without hope. The suicide rate increases every Christmas season because people without Christ, lack hope. But celebrating Christ at Christmas brings people hope, and that is what we want to grasp in the Scriptures this morning.

We are going to explore three aspects of hope this morning relating to Christ and Christmas. First, hope in Christ sustains one while waiting. Second, hope in Christ enables one to run the race of faith with endurance. And third, hope in Christ through the Holy Spirit spiritually fills and sustains us.

Let me pray as we prepared to delve into God’s Word.

Hope Waits

First of all, hope in Christ gets you through the waiting. The Advent season is all about waiting. It is a time when we remember the long period of waiting that preceded the

first coming of Christ and also a time when we reflect on our own season of waiting for the second coming of Christ.

That first period of waiting stretched all the way from Genesis to Matthew, from Adam and Eve to Joseph and Mary, from the Garden of Eden to the manger in Bethlehem. The first signal of hope during that long period of waiting came shortly after Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden. God instructed Adam, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:16-17) Adam and Eve both disobeyed this command from God, bringing death not only upon themselves but upon the entire human race to come. Later in chapter 3, after the fall, “The LORD God said to the serpent, ‘Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. ¹⁵ I will put *animosity* between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.’ ” (Genesis 3:14-15) The serpent and his offspring represent Satan and all who follow in Satan’s path, which is all who live in the corrupt world without Christ. The woman and her offspring represent Eve and all those who love and follow God. Indeed, there has been animosity between Satan and those who follow God ever since the garden. Yet even in this word of judgment there was a beacon of hope for the people of God. Because even though the woman’s offspring at first seems to represent many descendants of Eve, verse 15 focuses on one specific individual descended from Eve who will triumph over Satan and the evil he has brought on mankind. Satan will strike his heel; meaning Satan thought the crucifixion would end God’s plan of salvation. However, the individual spoken of in Genesis 3 would crush the serpent or Satan’s head. Jesus rose from the dead to conquer death and bringing an the beginning of the end to Satan’s rule of misery over humanity. Jesus’ resurrection was the beginning of the end for Satan and Christ’s return will bring eternity for believers and eternal suffering for Satan and all who die without Christ.

God inspired hope in the form of prophecies that are contained throughout the Old Testament times. In Genesis 12, God called Abraham and promised him, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:2-3) God fulfilled this promise by bringing the nation of Israel out of Abraham, and through the nation of Israel, God continued to give promises about this special individual who would bring blessing to all the peoples of the earth. Through the long years of waiting the prophecies became more and more specific focusing on the Messiah who would come as Prophet, Priest and King to rescue God’s people. Around the year 700 B.C. the prophet Isaiah who told King Ahaz of Judah of the coming Messiah, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14) This was the clearest prophecy yet that the promised a specific offspring of Eve would come and deliver His people. There were still centuries of waiting for the Messiah to come, but these prophecies continued to give the people hope. These were long and difficult days for the people of Israel and yet their hope in the Messiah to come, helped them through the waiting.

It is the same for us today. We all go through periods of waiting in our lives and we need hope to get us through the waiting. Waiting is never easy and whatever you are waiting on today, I want you to know there is hope in Christ. Whether you are waiting on God’s direction or a job offer or an answer to prayer or a response from someone you love – whatever you are waiting for this morning, there is hope in Christ, and the candle of hope reminds us hope in Christ will get you through the waiting.

Hope Endures

Hope in Christ gets you through the waiting, and hope in Christ helps you run the race of life with faithful endurance. The writer of Hebrews reveals, “...let us also lay aside

every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.” (Hebrews 12: 1-2) An important part of the Christmas story has to do with the Magi who traveled to see Jesus after he was born and it would have taken months. The Magi were pagan magicians or astrologers who studied the stars and interpreted dreams. We find early instances of Magi in the book of Exodus with Moses in Egypt and then again in the book of Daniel. We are not told how many Magi visited Jesus, but later traditions speak of either twelve or three. These Magi were determined to find the Christ and traveled far to do so. The Apostle Matthew tells us of the Magi, “Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men (*Magi*) from the east came to Jerusalem, ² saying, ‘Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.’ ” (Matthew 2:1-2) God revealed to the Magi what should have been known by Herod, but Herod was evil and knew not the things of God.

The Magi are important for several reasons. They fulfilled Old Testament prophecy which spoke about nations and kings coming to Zion to worship the Lord. God revealed to the prophet Isaiah, “nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” (Isaiah 60:3) The Magi traveling for a long distance and time to worship the Christ and this too was a foreshadowing of the gospel going out to the Gentiles and far away nations and the gospel would not be confined to Israel. Christ gave the great commission to those who believe in Him, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit ...” (Matthew 28:19) The gifts the Magi brought to honor Christ were the gifts given to a king. They understood Jesus to be an earthy king of the Jews, but the Word of God through the Apostle Paul confirms Jesus is much more - to Timothy, Paul wrote, “keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which he will display at the proper

time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords,
¹⁶ who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever
seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (1 Timothy 6:14-16) So, the gifts
were indeed befitting of the King of all kings.

I would like to take some time to consider the distance and the endurance of the
Magi as they sought the King of the Jews. Matthew tells us that they came from the east,
so they were most likely from Babylon or Persia. Either way they had to travel a great
distance, perhaps over a thousand miles, over difficult and dangerous terrain in order to
come and see Christ. What would prompt them to make such a journey? The answer is
hope. The Magi asked Herod, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we
saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” (Mt. 2:2) Now you might wonder
how they would connect this star with the birth of the Messiah and at the same time the
Jewish leadership had not understood this message from God. As Magi they would have
been very interested in stars and prophecies, and of course they would have access to the
Old Testament Scriptures because of the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon centuries
before. Perhaps they focused on the prophecy found in the Book of Numbers, “I see him,
but not now; I behold him, but not near: a star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall
rise out of Israel ...” (Numbers 24:17) This prophecy connects a star with the scepter of the king
of Israel and it is observed from a distance. God used a star to signal to the Magi that the
Messiah had been born and it was this hope that gave them the endurance to travel a great
distance to worship the Christ. By the time they arrived Joseph, Mary and Jesus were no
longer in the manger or barn since it was some months after Christ was born.

It is hope in Christ that helps us go the distance in present life. We all go through
trials in life and it is easy to get discouraged. That is why it is so important to remember
that God is with you, God will help you, God has a purpose for you in your trials, and most
important of all, that eternal glory awaits you in heaven.

Paul wrote his 2nd letter to the Corinthian church which was experiencing great persecution, “So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:16-18) How did Paul endure persecution? Why was Paul telling the suffering Corinthians to continue the race and endure? Paul is also telling us this morning that as persecution begins to increase in America and the world we are to endure. How? By hope in the coming of Christ and by knowing when we die, we will be with God in heaven.

Hope Through The Holy Spirit

First, hope in Christ sustains one while waiting. Second, hope in Christ enables one to run the race of faith with endurance. And third, hope in Christ brings the Holy Spirit. As Paul wrote to the believers in Rome who were being persecuted, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. ² Through Christ we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:1-5) The Christmas story and Advent remind us to “rejoice in hope of the glory of God” – the glory of God is Jesus Christ!

The Christmas story is full of examples of people who put their hope in Christ and were not disappointed. We have already looked at the Magi who traveled a great distance to see Christ. Imagine if they went all that distance and Jesus was not even there. That would have been disappointing! But their hope was not disappointed. They found Christ in

Bethlehem, just as it had been prophesied. There are other examples as well. Remember that prophecy from Isaiah about the virgin who would give birth to a son? That prophecy was fulfilled when the virgin Mary gave birth to Christ. We read in the gospel of Matthew, the angel told Joseph, Mary “ ‘will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ ”²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:²³ ‘Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel.’ ” Mary was told by the angel that she would give birth to the Savior. Every pregnancy is a time of waiting and expectation and hope, and in this respect Mary’s pregnancy was no different than that of all women. As we read in Luke chapter 2, “Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:4-7) All of Mary’s hopes came to fruition when the baby was born and she held that newborn infant in her arms. **Mary’s hope in Christ was not disappointed.**

Simeon waited in hope for the birth of the Messiah. Scripture shows his hope fulfilled later in chapter 2 of Luke,²⁵ “Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law,²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said,²⁹ ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; (Simeon quotes Psalm 98 and, Isaiah chapters 43, 49 and 52)³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’ ” (Lk. 2:25-32) God told Simeon he would see the Messiah before

he died and at the precise moment that Joseph and Mary were bringing Jesus into the temple, the Spirit moved Simeon to go into the temple. **Simeon put his hope in Christ, and he was not disappointed.**

Then there is the prophetess, Anna. We read about her in Luke chapter 2 beginning in verse 36, “She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin,³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.” (Lk. 36-38) Anna lost her husband when she was young and she lived many years as a widow but she put all her hope in God, and **Anna’s hope was not disappointed.** She saw Christ in the temple.

I would like you to remember that Advent season is not just about those who waited for Christ’s first coming, it is also about us who wait for Christ’s second coming. When Christ returns, He will banish all evil, He will make all things right, He will restore the earth, we will see Christ face to face, and all our hopes will be fulfilled. As we read in Romans chapter 8,²² “For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.²⁴ **For in this hope we were saved.** Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?²⁵ **But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.**” (Romans 8:22-25) We do not need Christmas to find Christ because God came to us and gave us faith to believe and when we surrender our lives to Christ, we were given God the Holy Spirit to dwell within us and **we are not disappointed for we have eternal hope.** Romans 10:11 tells us, “For the Scripture says, (Quoting Isaiah 28:16 and Psalm 118:22) ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ If you put your trust in other things, they will disappoint you – whether you put your trust in people or in possessions or in future plans you have made – things will disappoint you, but not Christ. Jesus will never

disappoint you. Hope in Christ does not disappoint. But the world needs a journey to find Christ and the Advent weeks and the Christmas season gives us an opportunity to help people see their desperate need for a Savior.

Closing

The Christmas season is a wonderful season for so many reasons, but the most important reason is the hope that Christ brings to a lost world. Paul wrote to Timothy this truth, “[The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.](#)” (1 Timothy 1:15) Paul confesses he is a sinner saved by Christ, just like Christ has saved you. Jesus was born into this world so He could grow to be a man who never sinned but died on the cross for your sins and mine.

So, if you are discouraged this morning – if you are tired of waiting, if you feel like giving up, if you have faced too many disappointments in life – then let me point you to Christ and the hope that is found in Him alone. Hope in Christ sustains one while waiting. Hope in Christ enables one to run the race of faith with endurance. Hope in Christ fills us with God the Holy Spirit. Put your hope in Christ today and every day and you will know His grace and peace, and His living hope! Amen!