

COME LORD JESUS COME

A DEVOTIONAL FOR ADVENT



NATHAN SHERMAN & WILL WALKER

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PROVIDENCE CHURCH – AUSTIN, TX

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PREFACE: WHAT IS ADVENT?

Advent is a time of preparation, beginning four Sundays before Christmas. The word comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means coming or arrival. Similar to the Lenten season, which prepares us for Resurrection Sunday, Advent is a season of reflection and longing for the coming King. As our awareness for the first coming of Christ is heightened, our longing and expectation for his second advent increases as well.

The great proclamation “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:14) assures us that God has entered into human history through the incarnation of the Son. The season of Advent, a season of waiting, is designed to cultivate our awareness of God’s actions—past, present, and future. In this season, we hear the prophecies of the Messiah’s coming as addressed to us—people who wait for the second coming. Our sense of anticipation is heightened as we look for the day when the lion will lie down with the lamb, death will be swallowed up, and every tear will be wiped away. In this way Advent highlights for us the larger story of God’s redemptive plan.

A deliberate tension must be built into our practice of the Advent season. Christ has come, and yet not all things have reached completion. So we remember the longing of Israel, we give thanks for Christ’s birth, and we anticipate his return. For this reason, Advent began as a penitential season, a time for discipline and intentional repentance in the confident expectation and hope of Christ’s coming again.

Throughout the centuries, the Church has adopted many themes by dwelling on a specific idea during each week. We will use perhaps the most common theme by focusing on hope, peace, joy, and love.

We pray that when Christmas Day arrives and you are finished with this devotional, you will join with the early Church with the word, *Maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus!

WEEK I

HOPE

DAY 1: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

What is hope? We use the word all the time. I hope I don't get sick. I hope my boss is nice to me. I hope my favorite sports team is good this year.

When we use “hope” this way, we really mean something more like wish – a desire for something we want to have happen regardless of feasibility. Biblical hope, on the other hand, is “the confidence that what God has done for us in the past guarantees our participation in what God will do in the future.” The word “guarantees” demonstrates the vast difference between the fleeting wishes of casual hope and strong promise of biblical hope.

Hope is a future-oriented term, but it is grounded in past events. In the Old Testament, the source of hope for God's people was God's proven character and His mighty deeds in history. The Psalmist says, “Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord his God, who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, who keeps faith forever, who executes justice for the oppressed, who gives food to the hungry” (Psalm 146:5-7). His hope is founded in who God is and what He has done.

When God called Moses to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt, Moses had a list of excuses and doubts. God responded not by building up the person of Moses or even directly answering Moses' doubts; rather, God redirected Moses' hope to Himself. He appeals to the foundation of His promise and His ability to perform great deeds on earth (Exodus 6:1-8). After Moses, the Exodus event formed the basis of hope for the people of God. They told the story over and over again. This is why their

concept of Messiah was closely linked with terms like “Deliverer.”

Throughout the Bible, true hope is not tested against our ability to hope, but rather against the foundation of God’s ability to deliver. It is a deep longing for God to show himself for who He is again. Jean-Paul Sartre, a famous philosopher and atheist, said a month before he died that he so strongly resisted feelings of despair that he would say to himself, “I know I shall die in hope.” Then in profound sadness, he would add, “But hope needs a foundation.” Without a foundation, we have only wishful thinking or personal ability.

Advent is a season of hope because we look back to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, for “no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11). We also look forward to the day when Jesus will return, and fulfill our deepest longing to see him face to face.

Come, Lord Jesus, Come!

Reflection & Prayer:

Advent awakens us to this question: “What do I long for now?” If we are weak in hope, perhaps we have vested our hope in weak things: wealth, possessions, reputation, relationships. Perhaps these are the things we long for now. The more we walk around with that question and let it penetrate through the layers of distraction and self-protection, the more powerfully we will experience Advent. “Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (Psalm 139:23-24)

Scripture Reading: Romans 8:28-39

DAY 2: THE MAGI

The Advent season is reflective of the longing found in Old Testament scriptures; however, the advent of Christ appears almost 500 years after the final prophet Malachi. Israel wanes in exile having lost her national identity and unity under the Davidic kingly line.

The Gospel of Matthew provides us with the first glance at the anticipated arrival of the Messiah, King Jesus. One of Matthew's major intentions in his Gospel is to establish Jesus as the true and rightful King, and then to ask his reader: "Will you worship Him as King?"

Matthew establishes Jesus' Kingship by naming him the Son of David in the first verse, then mentioning David's name five more times in the first chapter. Then in 2:6, the Magi quote Micah 5:2, which prophesies a ruler from Bethlehem, David's hometown, who will shepherd God's people. Whoever this ruler is, he is clearly a new David—an unlikely high king who will lead Israel in righteousness.

We don't know much about the Magi, but they are most likely God-fearing Gentiles, who knew of the God of Israel, but didn't keep the Law and likely didn't have access to much of what we call the Old Testament. In other words, the Magi were unlikely candidates to announce the arrival of the king of Israel.

What we do know is that they traveled a great distance to witness the arrival of the King. Like Israel, the Magi were waiting for the coming of the Messiah-King and are a direct fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham that all the nations of the world would be blessed through the Seed.

The Magi are a good model for hope and worship because of their sacrifice and longing. Sometimes we sacrifice comfort and wealth to worship Jesus, but we do so begrudgingly — pseudo-suffering for Jesus, as it were. The Magi were anything but begrudging — "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" (Mt. 2:10). The babe is God in the flesh, majesty in a manger, mystery and glory. They could not help but fall down and worship (2:11).

While Jesus lay peacefully in a manger, He was also being prepared for obedience to the point of death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). Perhaps songwriter

Chris Rice says it best,

Fragile finger sent to heal us
Tender brow prepared for thorn
Tiny heart whose blood will save us
Unto us is born

The tender brow is a crucified king, humble in life, victorious in death.
Worship Him, Christ the King!

Reflection & Prayer:

Romans tells us all creation groans in anticipation for the renewal of God's people. Look around at the brokenness in the world, brokenness in people and creation. Only God entering into human suffering can begin to heal and restore. We anticipate a new Kingdom with a national identity and protected future; our hopes this season are dependent on this baby who makes all things new. Lord, we thank you for not leaving us in our brokenness, but when the time had fully come, you left your heavenly throne and entered into your creation. We thank you that your salvation is a rebuilding of a people, both Jew and Gentile, who know the joy of the lordship of King Jesus. We join with your creation to celebrate the lovingkindness you have shown to your people! Continue to restore to us joy of our salvation as we pray, "Come Lord Jesus, Come"!

Scripture Reading: Matt. 2:1-7; Isaiah 55

DAY 3: MARY AND ZECHARIAH

What do we do with some of the really difficult promises that God has made to us in Scripture? Like 1 Corinthians 10:13: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability.” If this is true, then why are we still struggling with the same old sin? The Bible’s promises should give us confidence and contentment in God’s faithfulness, but the reality is we often find ourselves in doubt and frustration. It might be that we don’t think God will actually come through on his promise or maybe that he is even unable to do so.

We can see two very different responses to these kinds of impossible promises in Zechariah and Mary. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were childless and “advanced in years,” meaning well past the time where they could have a baby. Barrenness for any expectant parents can bring great sorrow and pain, but compound this for Zechariah and Elizabeth, who lived in a culture that very likely condemned them as being cursed by God because of some great sin in their lives. You can imagine the angel Gabriel’s delight in telling them that not only was God answering their prayers for a child, but He was giving them a son like Elijah who would prepare the way for the Messiah.

Zechariah’s response was one of doubt and unbelief. God was delivering the greatest news this old man could have ever received — the answer to his decades-long prayer — yet Zechariah said, “How shall I know this? For I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years.” He wanted a sign. He wanted it to make sense. Like we are prone to do, Zechariah doubted God’s promise and maybe even God’s ability.

In contrast, Mary’s response to God’s “impossible” promise was one of humility. When Gabriel came to Mary, saying, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” Luke tells us that Mary was greatly troubled, trying to figure out what it meant. She didn’t understand it, but she received it. Rather than indignation, Mary’s initial posture was one of humility.

Then Gabriel gave her a promise that was just as unbelievable as the one he gave to Zechariah: “Despite the fact that you’re not married, despite the fact that you’ve never been with a man, despite the fact that in your knowledge you’re not from any type of royal lineage, you’re going to have

a baby growing in your womb whose kingdom will never ever, ever, ever, ever end.” Zechariah said, “This can’t be.” Mary said, “Let it be to me according to your word.”

We can easily contrast Mary’s humility against Zechariah’s indignation, but it is worth digging deeper: What about them produced these kinds of reactions? The difference between them is not their situation or strength, but rather their hope in God’s love for them. It seems that Zechariah had given up on the idea that God loved him and would provide for him. We can imagine him screaming, “You haven’t been there for the past fifty years, so why should I believe that you’ll be there now?” Mary, on the other hand, seems to have simply believed that God loved her so much that He would deliver on his promise.

When you hear or read the promises of God that seem to be too good to be true, do you believe that God loves you? When you are in a dark place, can you see that God is near and working for our good, to conform us into the image of His Son? This is what God did with Zechariah, even in his unbelief. Zechariah went through a grinder of disappointment, followed by nine months of silence, but on the other side of God’s provision, he was a humble and joyful man who hoped and trusted in God’s promises.

Christmas morning shows us that God is willing to fulfill His promises. Easter morning proves that God is able to fulfill His promises. We hope in both. We hope in Christ.

Reflection and Prayer:

We repent of our doubt that you are either unwilling or unable to fulfill your promises toward us. We repent of our doubt that you love us despite both the testimony of Scripture and the testimony of the lives of those around us. Give us humility so that we will trust you and your love for us.

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:5-38

DAY 4: JOHN THE BAPTIST

When we read the story of John the Baptist sending his disciples to ask Jesus if He is the Messiah, at first it seems a bit confusing. After all, hadn't we seen John baptize Jesus just a few chapters before, followed by a booming voice from Heaven declaring Jesus to be God's Son (3:13-17)? So why is he now confused and unsure?

Perhaps John had misunderstood what the Kingdom would be. Before baptizing Jesus, John was sent by God to preach that Jesus is, "coming after me [and] is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (3:11-12).

In other words, John could have likely thought the coming of the Messiah meant the judgment of sinners and the enemies of Israel. We know that he condemned the Pharisees and Sadducees for their lack of faith and genuine piety, but it was also a common expectation that the Messiah would liberate Israel from under the oppressive Roman rule. It was thought that God would re-gather the exiled tribes of Israel under the benevolent rule of a David-like King. And just as David defeated all of Israel's enemies and ruled over the region, Israel would be restored to a national prominence in the Mediterranean.

Then we get to Chapter 11, and John is rotting in the jail cell of Israel's imposter king. When John heard the audible voice from heaven as he baptized Jesus, there would have been no doubt on that day concerning who he was baptizing. Undoubtedly, as he laid his head down to sleep that night, he thought carefully upon the events of the day and worshipped God for his revelation. Surely for many weeks and months he eagerly expected news of the teachings and doings of Jesus. We do not know how much time passed from that day at the Jordan to when he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he was indeed the Messiah, but it is evident that much of the powerful impact of that day at the river had waned. Jesus was supposed to come with his winnowing fork in hand separating the wheat from the chaff, the righteous from the unrighteous. So how did Jesus answer his question? It seems vague to us, but it would not at all have been vague to John. Jesus pointed John's disciples to the miracles that had been seen in Matthew 8-9, for these indicate that the long-

awaited kingdom prophesied by Isaiah had come: “the blind are seeing” (Mt. 9:27-31; Is.29:18; 35:5; 42:7,18); “the lame are walking” (Mt. 9:2-8; Is. 35:6); “the lepers are cleansed” (Mt. 8:1-4; Is. 53:4); “the deaf are hearing” (Mt. 9:32-33; Is. 35:5; 29:18; 42:18); “the dead are raised” (Mt. 9:18-26; Is. 26:19); “the poor are receiving the gospel” (Mt. 4:17, 23; 5-7, 9:35; 10:7; Is. 61:1).

All of these prophesies from Isaiah are taken out of texts in which the Messiah is judging the unrighteous. This is what John must have expected to be true of Jesus too. However, Jesus not once mentioned the coming judgment to John, but rather tells only of healing and salvation. Just as Isaiah 40 foretold, God is indeed visiting and comforting his people.

It seems that John had hoped in a King who would judge the wicked. While this judgment is a necessary part of God’s unfolding plan, what is infinitely more glorious than John could have ever imagined was the salvation of God’s new and adopted sons. John had a certain hope and expectation for how Jesus would come and work, and when Jesus didn’t act as John expected, he had doubts.

Is your hope in Jesus’ coming found in what Jesus can do for you? Or do you trust Him so much that when things don’t go as you’d like or expect your hope in Him is unwavering? Sometimes it’s hard for us to remember that we are not the main character of our own story, but that we are very much a supporting actor that only exists to show how dynamic the Main Character really is. Hope that is real and sustainable is found in the first coming of Christ, in which he has reconciled sinners to God. And is found in His second coming, when he will make all things new.

Reflection and Prayer:

We repent of hoping that your Kingdom only serves to vindicate us and to advance us. We hope in you and you alone. May we live our lives to bring glory to the risen Christ, making much of Him and less of us. We hope in your first coming to redeem us, and your second coming to make all things new.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 71

DAY 5: SECOND COMING

We have been thinking about how hope is grounded in the past – God’s mighty deeds for Israel and the sufficiency of Christ’s redemptive work. Today we turn our eyes to the future. The major emphasis on hope in the New Testament centers around the second coming of Christ, when the believer’s hope becomes experienced reality rather than anticipation of future experience.

Paul says we “groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). Upon first reading, I was struck by the phrase “groan inwardly” for two reasons. First, I wasn’t sure what it meant. Second, I suspected that I don’t actually do that.

The word used for “groan” in this verse has been described as, “A sighing that takes place by reason of a state of oppression which causes suffering and from which there is the desire to be free.” Paul uses the same word in 2 Corinthians 5:2 to express that existence in the body is a burden, a sign that redemption is not yet complete.

So my suspicion is confirmed: I don’t really sense that having a body is oppressive, and thus, I do not long to be free from life in this body. Not in the way that slaves groan in their labor and long to be free. In plain terms, I like my life on earth. Don’t get me wrong, I look forward to the day when Jesus will set everything right, but I cannot say that I groan inwardly as I anticipate that day.

Well, what’s wrong with liking life? Nothing. Or maybe everything. Jesus said he came so that we may have life to the fullest, and he said that if anyone wants to save his life he must lose it. Advent is forcing me to wrestle with this tension, pushing me back over and over to the same question: “What do I long for now?” Is the coming of Christ such a deep felt longing that I am brought to the knowledge life in this body is a burden, and I inwardly groan because my desire for freedom simply cannot be expressed in words?

Early Christians used the phrase maranatha in greeting each other, which is translated Come, Lord Jesus! When you see injustice in the world, do you pray Come, Lord Jesus? When you are grieved by your own sin, do you find yourself thinking Come, Lord Jesus? If not, I suspect that you

have placed your hope in something other than Jesus and His kingdom. Jesus is the only one that can bring true and final justice. Hoping in anything else is folly. Jesus is the only one who will fully free you from sin.

The Apostle John said that when Jesus appears, we will finally be like him because we will see Jesus as he really is. The glory and holiness of Jesus will be so captivating and beautiful that all of the other things in which we have placed our hope will be abandoned and forgotten.

To this end Jesus beckons us:

Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End ...

I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star. The Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life ...

He who testifies to these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon." (Revelation 22:7-21).

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus

Reflection and Prayer:

We repent of all that keeps us from the work of God's kingdom on earth (fear, insecurity, selfishness, ignorance, pride, and laziness), and we express our desire for God to use us in His works of mercy, reconciliation, justice, service, and worship. We are praying for God's kingdom to come on earth – in our lives, our relationships, our church, and our city – as it is in heaven.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 51:1-12, Matthew 28:18-20, Matthew 5:13-16,
2 Thes. 2:16-17

WEEK II

PEACE

DAY 1: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Holman's Bible Dictionary defines peace as a "sense of well-being and fulfillment that comes from God and is dependent on His presence." A sense of well-being and fulfillment from God means, at least in part, that we embrace all the elements of our existence as God-ordained. That is, we are at rest in God's sovereign rule and assured of His faithful care. This peace, which we embrace by faith, was absolute reality for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Before eating of the fruit, they didn't have to worry about what was good or evil — they trusted God exclusively for what was good and best for them.

Similarly, infants trust their parents implicitly. When they get hungry or need a diaper changed, they cry, signaling to their parents that they need them. When their parents pick them up, they don't worry about whether or not they will be dropped. As children grow, though, they begin to exert their independence and rebel against their parents. Even a toddler can regard parental instruction as mere suggestion. She can weigh the options and do the opposite of what her parent wants, even though the parent knows what is best for her.

We have never fully experienced the complete trust in God that Adam and Eve had. Consequently, we have never had the accompanying peace. Our broken and decaying world is only part of our reality. Dallas Willard comments, "the entire posture of our embodied self and its surroundings is habitually inclined toward physical or earthly reality as the only reality there is," which is why we are inclined to trust and hope in what is seen. Jesus warns us along these lines: "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious

about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25). If we seek fulfillment in temporal things like security, appearance and money, then our fate is fixed. We will be anxious. This is why Paul said that the peace of God transcends all understanding. It simply isn’t how the world thinks, precisely because the world can’t see it.

The Advent season summons us to hope in what is unseen, the unlikely birth of a Savior and the return of our King. When our trust is in the God-reality that is beyond any risk of threat, anxiety is pointless. “It occurs,” Willard says, “only as a hangover of bad habits established when we were trusting things — like human approval and material possessions — that were certain to let us down. Now our strategy should be one of resolute rejection of worry, while we concentrate on the future in hope and with prayer and on the past with thanksgiving.”

Peace is dependent on God’s presence as a good and caring Father because there simply isn’t any other source of peace. The Law and the Prophets bear witness to this truth, which is why they looked to God to set things right in our world, to restore the peace of Eden. The ultimate prayer for peace is, “Come, Lord Jesus, Come.”

Reflection & Prayer:

What are my anxious thoughts? What temporal things am I trusting in that underlie these thoughts? Will I trust God as my Father in these areas? Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today what we need for today, and we will trust that tomorrow will be the same.

Scripture Reading: Instead of a passage, let’s take a survey of the peace that is from God in the Old Testament: Leviticus 26:6; 1 Chronicles 12:18, 22:9; 1 Kings 2:33; Isaiah 26:12, 52:7; Ezekiel 37:26; Malachi 2:5-6; Job 22:21, 25:2; Psalm 4:8; 29:11, 85:8, 122:6-8; Proverbs 3:17.

DAY 2: SHALOM

In his book, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga writes, “In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight — a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.” This picture stands in shining contrast to the reductionist cliché of “world peace” often associated with bumper stickers and beauty pageant stereotypes.

Peace is from God. Just as no possession nor approval nor achievement can usher peace into our lives, neither can any political structure or humanitarian effort set the world right. In this world we see internal discord ranging from mild anxiety to severe mental health disorders. We see interpersonal conflict in struggling marriages, broken families, divided communities and war-torn countries.

It is against this backdrop that the depth and richness of biblical peace is ushered in by the perfect life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:19-20).

Jesus enters into our world as the Prince of Peace, restoring us to the Father by his own blood, welcoming us in as sons and daughters of God. We are no longer children of wrath, at war with God. Our deepest, most urgent need has been met — peace with God — and we are free from enslaving anxiety.

But the peace that Jesus came to bring doesn't stop there. In Christ we have peace with God, and we become agents of peace in a world of discord. The peace Jesus brings is universal in scope, and thus has far-reaching implications for our relationships, communities and world. This is the work that God has prepared for us.

As Christmas approaches and we anticipate the coming of the Prince of Peace, we consider an important and often neglected aspect of our role as believers in Christ. If God sent Jesus to reconcile us to himself, then as his image-bearers we represent his character to this world when we actively

seek to reconcile conflict with the people in our lives and in the world at large. As believers, we are the sons and daughters of God, agents in this world of our Heavenly Father's peace, bringing his eternal kingdom to earth now. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul says, "All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation."

If we are bored in our Christian life, perhaps it is because we haven't taken to heart that the kingdom of heaven is at hand, employing us as citizens who expand God's rule and call upon His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. We haven't read the apocalyptic accounts as the birth pangs of a new heaven and a new earth recreated with justice and peace.

He has given us the ministry of reconciliation. How are we doing as his ambassadors? In our personal lives, are we quick (or even willing?) to admit when we are wrong and earnest in asking forgiveness? When offended, do we offer forgiveness with no strings attached, not harboring resentment or keeping a record of wrongs, allowing relationships to heal and rebuild? In the local and global community, are we looking to the ways of social justice, being a voice and an advocate for the marginalized, offering encouragement and physical resources to those who are struggling? In the areas we find ourselves most lacking, perhaps it is because we are building our own kingdoms, or have forgotten the magnitude of our own offense against God, which has been forgiven and paid in full.

As we enter into the advent season and look to the kingdom of God introduced in the person and ministry of Jesus Christ, we reflect on the birth announcement of Christ, and the eternal kingdom of peace he would bring, foretold by the prophet Isaiah: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; And the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end..." (Isaiah 9:6-7a).

Reflection & Prayer:

We repent of trying to build our own kingdoms instead of experiencing yours. We repent of the relationships where we are keeping a record of wrongs or harboring unforgiveness. We ask you to show us practical ways to be ambassadors of Christ's ministry of reconciliation to the marginalized in the city and globally. Father, we thank you for the gift of your

reconciliation through Christ's death on our behalf. Give us the faith to know that you have provided all of the resources necessary to see your will be done, resting us from our striving effort apart from Christ. Lord, may your kingdom come in my heart, in my life and in my city.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 42:1-9, Ephesians 2:11-22

DAY 3: ANGELS & SHEPHERDS

The nativity story is a familiar one. We have plays and songs and decorations that capture the event. We know this story so well, in fact, that we miss just how unexpected and shocking the story really is.

First of all, it begins with an announcement from angels: The High King of Heaven is coming to earth. This is a story from another world, which is now coming to us. Given the realities of the day, we might expect the angels to make this announcement to the Roman authorities or to the religious elite in Jerusalem. Instead, they went to a small town in the middle of nowhere and proclaimed the coming King to a group of shepherds.

Shepherds! Lowly shepherds. They were not the movers and shakers, and certainly not the kind of people through whom you would spread the word, so to speak. From any common sense point of view, this is bizarre. So why would God do this? Why should Jesus be born in Bethlehem, unknown to most of the world, and be only announced to an inconsequential few?

God seems to nearly always use the weak, unassuming and humble to bring His kingdom of peace. Abraham was an old man in the land of Ur. David was a young boy in the pasture. Gideon was short-handed against a great army. This is the story of the whole nation of Israel: "It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples" (Deut. 7:7).

The fact that the angels announced the peace of the Messiah to the shepherds instead of kings and priests is incredibly reassuring. God has made, and will make, peace with the humble — those who are not dependent upon themselves for righteousness or moral acceptance. It is those who understand their lowly position before the Wonderful Counselor and Mighty God, the Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace and come to worship him, who will be saved.

Jesus taught this to his disciples (Luke 9:46-48; Luke 22:24-30). Paul and the other apostles taught it as well (1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Philippians 2:1-11; 1 Peter 3:12-19; James 2:1-13). The connection between humility and peace is at the center of the gospel message.

In response to the criticism that Christianity is just a crutch for the emotionally or psychologically needy, John Piper counters that it is not only a crutch — it is an entire ICU. We were once dead in our sins and trespasses (Eph. 2:1), naturally God's enemies (Romans 5:10), and in need of a saving God to bring us to life (Eph. 2:4-10). Those who do not think they are sick will never get well (Matthew 9:12-13).

The season of Advent brings us peace because God has reconciled us to himself through His Son. We experience this peace when we recognize our humble state before the unassuming manger of the saving, loving and good King Jesus. Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Phil. 2:6-8).

Reflection & Prayer:

Am I trying to keep up appearances? Am I trying to be good enough for God to love? God, you are a holy God, righteous and just, beyond compare. I confess my pride — thinking I am somehow acceptable on my own merit. I confess my fear — thinking that you would not love a sinner like me. I turn to Jesus, “who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25). He came for the sick. He died for the ungodly. May I be counted among those who are lowly enough to see the Lord in the manger.

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:8-20; Isaiah 53:1-3; Phil. 2:1-12

DAY 4: SIMON OF CYRENE

“After mocking Jesus, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon; they compelled this man to carry his cross” (Matthew 27:31-32).

The way the story reads it seems that this man, Simon of Cyrene, was inconsequential, a mere bystander, a wrong-place-wrong-time casualty. I imagine that he was simply going about his business as usual – doing the day’s tasks, thinking of things that interest him and talking to friends – when he stopped to see what all the commotion was about. And that, of course, is how he got dragged into the mess.

It’s the day-to-day aspect of Simon’s life that intrigues me. What was “peace” to him? If he was anything like most of us, I would say that peace in his mind had to do with preserving a certain quality of life and avoiding hardship as much as it was up to him to do so.

We have notions of peace for people and places beyond our immediate community, sure, but these are often little more than passing wishes for an ideal that seems out of reach, or at least out of our reach. Best to just focus on what is at hand.

What is “at hand” is precisely the issue. God is among us, burning in bushes, walking along the road to Emmaus, blowing like the wind. This is at the heart of Jesus’ message: “The kingdom of God is at hand”. Advent is an invitation to remember this proclamation, to turn aside, to open our eyes and to be filled. God is calling those who seem to be mere bystanders into the redemptive plot.

Year after year Advent passes us by. We may stop to look now and then, but never allow ourselves to be pulled in. Too many other concerns: presents, year-end work, family, parties ... business as usual. What if this year we stopped to look, entered into the Story, and from the commotion came this question: “What do I long for now?”

The general tone of Advent is one of excitement, the giddy anticipation of a child for Christmas morning. But as an adult there is an element of sober reflection concerning our present longing, or lack of it. Do I long

for peace? Is my notion of peace really something else altogether? What do I long for now?

I tried to remain a bystander in the crowd, content not to wrestle with this question, but somehow I got talked into carrying these words around. And now they have become a heavy load. The things I had to do, the longings I had, the burdens I was already carrying, all of it now subject to this cross. All of it now inconsequential in comparison to the coming of our Lord.

My day-to-day definition of peace – “as much happiness and as little pain as possible” – is crumbling under the weight of these words. The ages of longing in God’s people, the groaning of creation, the intercession of the Holy Spirit, the collective anticipation of the heavenly host — all of it is mounting up in these words, compelling me to leave the crowd of onlookers and join the company of those who carry the Cross. The ones who have turned aside and been dragged into the beautiful mess of redemption. The heavy-hearted and expectant ones, whose song has become the chorus of advent: “Come, Lord Jesus, come.”

Reflection & Prayer:

Is my notion of peace really more concerned with comfort than redemption? How do I try to avoid the burden of being pulled into God’s activity? Lord, Your kingdom is coming to earth as it is in heaven. But I am preoccupied with my own little realm of activity and concern. I want to turn aside and see. Rescue me from the love of comfort and ease, and pull me into the work of your kingdom.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 11

DAY 5: JONAH

On the surface, Jonah seems to be all about the glory of God in his disgust of Nineveh. As a prophet, he was likely thought of as a man of God and someone who was very concerned with things like worship and repentance. When God calls him to go to Nineveh, however, we see him for what he really is: a condescending coward. His religion is myopic, and his concern for worship and repentance is anemic.

He certainly enjoys being one of God's people when it means living like he wants to live and with people who are like him. We can certainly identify. Most of us want very much to love God, but often our circle of concern is too small. Just as Jonah has no framework for a salvation outside of Israel, we are also given to the kind of self-absorption that wants personal peace, but has no framework for the kind of peace that comes in the midst of trial and sacrificial living. In one of his personal letters to a friend, C. S. Lewis wrote, "We are not doubting that God will do the best for us; we're wondering how painful the best will turn out to be."

Is it possible that we can want the peace of God without actually wanting the God of peace? In other words, we want a "peaceful" life that's free from frustration and anxiety but without seeking the God who can actually give peace. Instead, we worship idols — false gods who offer rest and satisfaction but can never actually give it.

Jonah wanted the benefits of the Father — a safe and protected land, relative prosperity, religious identity — but in the end it is evident that he does not actually want the Father. He wants the peace of God without having to submit to the God of peace and lacks concern for those who desperately need God.

The irony is that when you seek the God of peace you get the peace of God. Jesus says: "O you of little faith! Therefore do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."

In other words, seek first the God who can provide benefits, and all of the benefits will be given to you. It is never the other way around. Keep in

mind that peace is a good thing we should actually want — just like we want salvation, community, contentment and families who worship God. The question is: does our joy come from these things or from the God who gives them?

A good indicator that you are deriving joy from His benefits rather from God Himself is how you respond when things are hard — when you are not experiencing community, when you are discontent with your job or when you are frustrated with your kids.

This time of Advent, a time of waiting and expectation, couldn't be a better time for us to reflect on what it is we are waiting upon and expecting. Do we wait for Jesus, His Kingdom and the glory of God? Or do we merely wait for a season of sentimentality and family gatherings? Are we like kids who can only think about opening presents? May we be those who seek the gift of God above all else.

Reflection and Prayer:

Does God have say in my life? Is my sense of well being tied to what God gives me or to God himself? We repent for only wanting the things that you can provide for us without actually wanting you. Would you reveal yourself to us in this time of expectation, so that we see just how glorious you are? Forgive our self-absorption and lack of faith, and enlarge our hearts for the world around us. May your peace reign in and through your people, O God.

Scripture Reading: Jonah 4; Philippians 4:4-9

WEEK III

JOY

DAY 1: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Advent is a season of hope, remembering the longing of God's people for the Messiah and rekindling our own desire for Christ's return. It is a time of reflection and preparation, both of which require us to enter into the season, forsaking the usual hustle and bustle.

The last two weeks have invited our reflection, considering the question: "What do I long for now?" Our weak desires have been exposed by the powerful images and stories of God's mighty deeds throughout history. We have been confronted with our day-to-day cravings, which often have little to do with the redemptive work of Christ or his coming reign of peace and justice. Our only recourse in these times of searching for hope has been to plead the cry of Advent: "Come, Lord Jesus, come." Come and revive our spirit, lift our eyes to the God of hope and to Christ, our hope of glory.

Now in the last week of Advent we shift from reflection to preparation, from longing to anticipation. The clouds are breaking, morning is coming. The Kingdom of Heaven has begun its invasion of earth. Christmas Day is to the Christian what D-Day was to the beleaguered French. In the first week of the invasion they celebrated with great joy as they saw the Allies march through their destroyed towns. Amidst their broken lives, they had great joy because of the hope brought by the invasion.

We are entering into the long-awaited joy of annunciation: "The angel said to Mary, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.'"

The stories of Jesus' birth are filled with hints of what his life will mean for us. Faith and generosity overcome impossibility. Poverty and persecution reveal glory. Joy emerges from hope.

The seemingly impossible is already unfolding even before the birth of Jesus: his birth foretold by the prophets and the angel Gabriel, his conception in the virgin Mary, John the Baptist leaping in his mother's womb. These were the signs of what Gabriel said to Mary: "Nothing will be impossible with God."

This promise to Mary brings us great joy. When we think about our hope in meaningless things, the lack of peace in our lives and how we fail to love God and our neighbor, we can be discouraged to not trust in God's promise to make us like Jesus. The impossible is made possible through Christ. Conforming sinners like us into the holiness of Jesus truly requires a miraculous work. But God has promised to complete that which he has started. So we, like Mary, say, "Let it be to me according to your word."

Reflection and Prayer:

Our Father, who is Heaven. Continue revealing yourself to the world, making your name known and glorified. May the Kingdom of Christ, which you inaugurated in a stable, expand throughout the nations and in our lives. Move in our relationships, jobs and families in any way which you see fit and will bring the greatest glory to you. May our world worship and delight in you as those in Heaven.

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:26-45

DAY 2: GOD'S PROMISES

Joseph and Mary were forced into a manger where the Son of God was born, because “there was no room in the inn.” I wonder if this statement is truer for us today — not enough room for Jesus in our lives.

On the night that Jesus was born, Luke describes an angel of the Lord appearing to some shepherds who were watching their flocks and told them that he brought good news of great joy. The coming of Jesus was good news of great joy.

Is the coming of Christmas day good news of great joy to you? Or is your holiday season filled with frenetic activity: making plans, dealing with difficult family members, worrying about your house or kids or gifts?

For some, Christmas is a reminder of loved ones lost, unmet expectations, an absent father. This seems like a far cry from good news of great joy. And though well-meant, a bumper sticker reminder of “Jesus is the reason for the season” doesn’t make us feel much better.

So what are we to do if Christmas is an occasion for stress or sorrow? It is tempting to put on a smile and push through the festivities without bringing other people down. However, a serious consideration of Advent causes us to long for more than mustering a smile or faking it. We long for authentic joy, but how do we get it?

As opposed to any false sense of joy that we try and acquire for ourselves, it is important to establish a fundamental principle about joy: that is, joy is not acquired, but experienced. Meaning, much like grace, joy is a gift we receive. Joy is a response to God’s free grace. We can’t control it, manufacture it, or tell it what to do. It can’t be bought at any price.

Happiness is not the same as joy. It often accompanies joy, but it is more circumstantial. It ebbs and flows depending on the occasion. Joy, on the other hand, is an abiding delight in someone or something you love.

Advent is a journey to joy, but it is not we who are traveling. Joy is coming to us. Commenting on Hebrews 12:2, which says, “for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross,” John Piper says “the joy set before him” is

us — those whom he came to redeem. The joy that drove Jesus to earth, to be born in a manger, to be persecuted and to be killed on the cross is the redemption of his Church. Advent beckons us to slow down and to look to Jesus, who delights in us to the point of his own death, so that our joy may be complete in Him. Anticipation gives way to arrival.

Reflection and Prayer:

During this Advent season, may we experience you in ways that produce a deep and abiding delight in you. You have come to us to purchase us, to redeem us, to save us at great cost to yourself. May our delight in you be found in these truths rather than fleeting feelings of sentimentality and happiness. Like Jesus whose delight in you was so deep that he was obedient to the point of death, might our joy be made full in you even in times of waiting or suffering. We cannot manufacture joy, Father. Give us joy and make us joyful because of who you are and what you have done.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 12:1-11; Psalm 30

DAY 3: MARY & MARTHA

Because joy is something we experience rather than acquire, Advent is a special time when we slow down and delight in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He came as the joy of our salvation, and he will come again so that our joy will be made complete. But what about the in-between? How do we experience this deep joy here and now? Luke show us how in the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42).

Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. But Martha was distracted with much serving.

Martha is busy serving: cleaning, cooking, serving and entertaining, making sure everything is just right. Mary is the complete opposite. She likes to sit at the feet of Jesus and listen, contemplate and soak in the moment. Whether grieving or serving or worshipping, Mary always seems to make her way to the feet of Jesus.

And [Martha] went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me."

As in, "Look, I am doing all the work, which seems to be going unnoticed by the way, and my sister isn't doing anything! I am doing all this for you, but she is getting all the attention."

If you have ever been the one doing all the work while others stand by, then you can understand Martha's frustration. The only thing worse than doing more than your fair share is not being noticed for it.

But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."

In other words, "Martha, you are confused. Joy cannot be acquired; it can only be experienced. Quit trying to acquire my approval. Quit looking for joy in your busyness. Don't you understand? Joy comes from being in my presence. Joy comes from experiencing the power of the

kingdom of God that I have come to restore. You cannot acquire it for yourself. You can only experience it as you experience me.”

In what ways are you trying to acquire or manufacture joy for yourself? Do you work hard at your job for approval from others? Or do you work hard to make sure you have enough money to buy the things that you think will really make you happy? Do you try to acquire joy from the successes of your kids or the quality of your parenting? All of these can only bring joy when they are soaked in the waters that flow from the Well-spring of Joy Himself. When our ultimate delight and treasure is Jesus, then our spouse, our kids, our job can bring actual joy because they are not being worshiped.

Let the Advent season usher you to the feet of Jesus.

Reflection and Prayer:

We repent of trying to first delight in things other than you and then trying to fit you into what little time and energy we have left. In this Advent season, allow us to slow our lives and our desires to find rest and ultimate joy in you and you alone. Satisfy our deepest longings for approval and significance that we so easily look to find in other things or people. Make our joy full.

Scripture Reading: Luke 10:38-42; John 16:16-24

DAY 4: WAITING

What is the joy of waiting? We have all experienced how waiting and anticipation heightens the joy of consummation. The first example that comes to mind is the birth of a child. If babies came right after conception, the new life might bring more shock and fear than joy in the moment. Perhaps God's gift to us is time — time to tell everyone our good news, time to paint a room and buy things, time to prepare ourselves for this new life. Instantaneous birth would rob us of the joy of waiting, but with nine months to prepare and imagine, the birthday comes as a glorious celebration!

An example of this from Scripture is Adam's first reaction to Eve. Adam lived alone for some amount of time; he worked naming the animals and stewarding the garden. Yet, we read he had no suitable helper, and it was "not good." Day-after-day Adam was faced with the reality that he was alone. Not without company, but without companionship. Thus, when Adam first laid eyes on Eve, he broke out into song: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man." (Genesis 2:23)

Adam, I'm sure, would have been glad to have Eve from day one. But the waiting, the unnamed longing for someone with flesh and bone like his, brought about a joy he could not have otherwise known.

There is in all of us a deep sense of longing that has to do with incompleteness — embryonic aspirations, parts of us that remain unknown, an ever-increasing awareness of our broken world. We may be redeemed and joyful in Christ, but we know there is more — that we were made for another world. Lingering in our souls is the eerie memory of Eden and the mystery of kingdom come.

Pregnancy strikes me as one of the few things that we are required to wait for anymore. In fact, almost every occasion of waiting is now largely seen as an imposition. It's not that life stops during pregnancy. We still have all the usual things to do. But the growing belly is a constant reminder of what is to come. There is nothing we can do to hasten it or prolong it. We can only prepare and wait. This is the kind of longing

Paul speaks of:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.” (Romans 8:22-25)

Advent makes us wait and take note that this is how God chose to come into our world. Not in a flash from the sky, but as a seed in the womb of a woman. After thousands of years, the Messiah finally comes, and then there is waiting. For Mary and Joseph, Elizabeth and Zechariah, it was a blessed time ... time to take it all in, time to prepare and dream wild dreams, time to break out in song!

Joy is experienced so much more deeply when we are made to wait for the thing we long for. The anticipation of Advent makes the Joy of Christmas morning even more palpable.

Reflection and Prayer:

Come, Lord Jesus Come.
Come when you will.
We await your return.

Come when time is full,
Our pregnant hope due.
New life in our old world,
New bodies in full view.

Come in the morning,
Our long-awaited light.
The day breaks death,
The darkness now in flight.

Come with trumpet sound,
Our consummate song.
Resounding joy for all
Who have waited so long.

Scripture Reading: Luke 2:46-80

DAY 5: SECOND COMING

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).

He said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord” — and that he had said these things to her. (John 20:11-18)

Everything about joy that we have talked about this week is seen here in Mary Magdalene: victory in the midst of suffering, joy in experiencing a person, heightened joy because of waiting.

I can only imagine what Mary must have been thinking that Sunday morning. Maybe he wasn't who he said he was. I thought he was going to really deliver us. Or maybe, I still believe in him, but I just don't understand.

Confusion. Disappointment. Hopelessness. Even after seeing the angels at the tomb, she's still weeping when Jesus approaches her. She was looking right at him, but she did not recognize Jesus until he said her name, “Mary.” This is one of the most moving pictures in the four gospels. Jesus, the risen and glorified Lord, gently says her name and she sees. The encounter with Jesus opens the floodgates of joy.

Our story is no less miraculous. God has opened our eyes to see and our hearts to believe. He has put within us a longing to see Jesus face-to-face. John tells us, “Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like

him, because we shall see him as he is.” (1 John 3:2)

The time of disappointment, confusion, pain, jealousy, anger and grief will be no more. On that day, all our longings for hope, peace, love and joy will find complete satisfaction as Jesus looks at us and calls us by name.

Christmas shows God beginning to reveal his beautiful plan of redemption, Easter shows his power to accomplish his plan, and the Second Coming will show the consummation of the plan.

Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus!

Reflection and Prayer:

Father, even though you have redeemed us and given us eyes to see, we long for the day of Jesus' return, when we will see him as he is and be made like him. We long for the day to find our ultimate and undistracted joy, delight, and satisfaction in you just as Jesus does. Make us content where we are now, but not satisfied. Increase our compassion for the world around us as you increase our desire for your return. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Scripture Reading: Revelation 22:6-20

WEEK IV

LOVE

DAY 1: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

We know that God loves us because he sent his only son that we might have life in him (John 3:16). If it weren't for Jesus' life, death and resurrection, God's love for us could be very easy to doubt. After all, the world we live in is full of disappointment, pain and death. It can often seem arbitrary and confusing; however, we know God loves us because on the Cross he has proven his love for us.

You may know that God loves you. Perhaps you have studied that God is love, even intellectually assenting to this in your minds, but there is something to consider to determine whether or not you are ready for Christmas. That is – can you receive God's love?

I'm not asking if you know about God's love. I'm wondering if you know God's love. Are you as convinced as John was about God's love for you in Jesus?

It's imperative for us to reflect on this very important question because nearly every person struggles in some way to receive God's love as it is — His unconditional, unchanging, unrelenting love.

There was a time when I didn't think this was a big deal for me. I thought I was fine with God's love, but then one day I was confronted with just how free and great God's grace is. I got out a brand new journal that I was going to write in. When I turned to the first page I had this sense of getting a fresh start with God, as if in some way the sin and spiritual dryness that I had been feeling was erased, and I was getting some kind

of re-do. At that moment I realized I was only fine with God's love as long as I felt good enough to be loved. And to feel good enough, I just kept minimizing my sin and giving myself a re-do. Instead, God had to completely undo my understanding of His love for me.

The beauty of the gospel is that before you were united with Christ, you were entirely unlovable. You didn't just have some bad habits. You were completely dead in your sins and were in fact enemies with God (Eph. 2:1-3; Col. 1:21; Rom. 5:10). But because Christ's righteousness is credited to us who believe, God is well-pleased in us because he is well-pleased in Jesus. Do you believe that? That the statement of approval at Jesus' baptism applies to you as well — You are my son or daughter, in whom I am well pleased. And not because of anything you have done, and in fact, your life is still plenty messy and sinful. But if you are in Christ, God loves you still. This borders on scandalous and is so difficult for us to believe and receive.

I had to come to grips with the fact that God's love does not overlook the messy reality of my life. I had to see that God becoming flesh and dwelling among us was not just a pretty way of saying things, but rather a statement about the condescension of a holy God into a dark and sinful world — my world.

What about you? What difficulties do you have in receiving God's love? Do you diminish God's love by trying to earn it? Do you deflect God's love because you don't feel worthy of His love?

Do you feel Christ's faithfulness on your behalf? Does the story of God's gift create mere sentimentalism of carols and warm fires, or does it draw out a deep love for God?

Reflection and Prayer:

We repent of our constant attempts to earn your love. Not only can we never do this, but it makes a mockery of the victory that Christ has won on our behalf in condescension on Christmas and his death and resurrection on Easter. Give us the belief that you truly love us and are well-pleased in us because of Christ's righteousness. Allow us to swim deeply in the current of your love.

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:16-21

DAY 2: GOD'S LOVE FOR YOU

Perhaps you realized yesterday that, in some way, you have difficulty receiving God's love.

Some of us may have a subtle sense that we deserve God's love or that we could earn more of it. Let me put it this way: If you are not completely stunned that God loves you, then some small part of you thinks it makes sense that God loves you.

Do you ever consciously or unconsciously think: God would love me less if I [fill in the blank]? Stop reading for just a moment and think if you can put something in that blank. If you have things that you would put in the blank, then you may be stuck in a struggle to maintain a hollow image of being good enough. Because this is an exhausting struggle, you are probably spiritually tired. Nothing you could put in the blank would make you less lovable.

Pay close attention to what I am about to say: You cannot possibly be less lovable than you are. And when you come to grips with how truly unlovable you are, then you will know how great God's love really is.

We talked about this yesterday, but this is so important that we are going to think about it again today. You can't earn God's love. Eventually, you have to let go of that. God does not love you because you manage to impress important people. God does not love you because you are smart. God does not love you because you follow the rules. God does not love you because people think you're great. None of that matters if you are not in Christ. And if you are in Christ – united with Him in His righteousness, sharing in His inheritance – then God loves you because He loves Him.

Can you accept that? Can you be nothing so that Jesus can be everything? Even those of us who profess faith in Christ and trust in him for our righteousness can so quickly revert to thinking that we deserve or can earn God's love. This type of thinking is not a right preparation for Christmas and is contrary to everything that Jesus came to free us from.

Some of you do not think you deserve God's love at all, which is correct, but instead of rejoicing in the love that comes to those who don't deserve

it, you deflect it. You hide in your shame and guilt. You don't receive God's love because you don't feel worthy of it.

Do you ever consciously or unconsciously feel: God would love me more if I [fill in the blank]? If you have anything to put in the blank, then you may be stuck in a cycle of telling yourself that God will love you — some better version of you in the future. What I want you to accept is that He does love you, right now in whatever condition you are in.

It seems that everything that John says in the first chapter of his gospel about Jesus is evidence that God's love is greater than whatever you've done. We could talk all day about all that God has done to demonstrate His love, chiefly that He died for us, but at the end of all that, of all the reasons you know that God's love is real, you still have to answer this question: Is it real in your life?

Nothing you put in the blank would make you more lovable. Listen: If you are united with Christ, you cannot possibly be more lovable than you are. When you come to grips with how perfect and sufficient Jesus is for you, then you will truly know the final and unchanging love of God.

So when the glitter of the Christmas season is over and all that's left is torn wrapping paper and a trash bag of tinsel, we can become anxious. We think, what's next? Is this really it? Are all of the carols sung and now the bells chime in? Is it really over? The answer of course is no. But in that moment, we can tell our hearts, "What loveliness is God's gift to me in his Son Jesus Christ! Whose robes of righteousness clothe me with scandalous loveliness all year round."

Again, are you ready to receive God's love as it comes to you right where you are? If you are, you are ready for Christmas.

Reflection and Prayer:

Thank you for Christmas. Thank you for establishing your kingdom when we didn't want a King. Thank you for pursuing us when we did not want to be pursued. We repent of our pride and our shame. Both of these are deflections of your love and the work of Christ on our behalf. Make us more aware of your holiness and our sin, so that your love for us is completely unexpected and astonishing.

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-18

DAY 3: HOSEA

If you have a hard time receiving God's love, the foundational problem is that you are not trusting and treasuring Jesus as your righteousness and life. The last two days we have considered how we can tend to think that we are either deserving or undeserving of God's love because of something we've done. Yesterday we became aware of how our pride and shame are both deflections of God's love. Pride and shame are two sides of the same self-righteous coin. Either your head is up or your head is down, but in both cases you are measuring your lovability on the standard of your righteousness, or lack of it.

One of the places we see this most beautifully illustrated in the Old Testament is the shocking short story of Hosea. It begins like this: "When the LORD first spoke through Hosea, the LORD said to Hosea, 'Go, take to yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD'" (Hosea 1:2).

God gives Hosea the unthinkable task of taking a prostitute as a wife. This is not unthinkable because her past as a prostitute, but because of her future unfaithfulness to Hosea. He knows this before he marries her. God wants to show Hosea, and the nation of Israel, how they are continually unfaithful to their patient and faithful Husband.

Just as Hosea was sent to pursue Gomer in the middle of her adultery, so Christ was sent into history on a night into the arms of a young mother to pursue us in our unfaithfulness to God. We aren't told Gomer's reasons for her adultery, but if she's anything like me, it probably had a lot to do with either pride or shame. When I am especially prideful or shameful, it is near impossible for me to receive God's love for me, and I instead give myself to ones other than my Faithful Pursuer.

The Christmas story is that God created the heavens and the earth, and in the way that you love something you create, God so loved the world. When sin broke into the world, it marred its beauty and splendor. It dimmed the light, so to speak, but the darkness could not overcome God's love. For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son to redeem what is His and begin the work of restoring Eden — a new garden with a new family. For God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten son, that whoever believes in Him shall not die but have eternal life with God.

The story of Hosea and Gomer demonstrates it is not necessarily the act of being loved that re-directs our affections. The hope of the Christmas season is that Christ in you is able to know the love of the Father gifted to us in the Son. Christ in you is able to treasure this beautiful gift especially in a season of sentimentality. If Christ is our love, then Christmas is the anniversary of his proposal – a faithful Husband wedded to a disgraced bride in a marriage brokered by a loving Father sealed by the Spirit. The Christmas story is not about whether or not we deserve the gift of God's love. It's not really about us at all, just as Gomer's story isn't about Gomer; it's about Hosea. Just as the Old Testament isn't about Israel, it's about Israel's God. The Christmas story is about God and His beloved Son, Jesus, who not only created the world, but then became a man in that world, to live the life that we should have lived and die the death that we should have died, so that we who are in Him could become children of God.

Reflection and Prayer:

God, you are faithful to us even though we are unfaithful to you. Forgive us our unfaithfulness. Forgive us for not receiving your love and loving you in response. By your Spirit continue the work of sanctification by raising our affections from unsatisfying desires and instead to the image of Christ who derives ultimate pleasure from your presence.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 103

DAY 4: PRODIGAL SON

In his book *Prodigal God*, Tim Keller is right to point out that the main character in the parable of the Prodigal Son is not the prodigal son at all — it's the father. In fact there is just as much emphasis placed on the older son as the younger (prodigal) son. The father's love for both sons is reckless and uninhibited and is the focus of the story. It seems as though Jesus is asking us to think about how we receive God's love — like the older son or the younger son?

If you are not familiar with the parable, take a moment to read it in Luke 15:11-32. Both sons, at least initially, had difficulty receiving their father's love. The younger son didn't receive or even want his father's love — he only wanted his inheritance. The only reason the younger son even acknowledges his father is for what the father can give him. When the younger son returns and the father throws him a welcoming party; the older son storms out and ignores the father's invitation to celebrate with them.

Just like the younger son, we often only acknowledge God for what he can give us: happiness, a respectable career, a good church community, a peaceful family, even salvation. Notice that none of these is bad in and of themselves, but when we desire only the gifts and not the Giver of the Gifts, we've got a problem. Our love for the Giver is then contingent upon our receiving of the gifts. We're like the younger son who just left his father's house with his inheritance saying, "Man, I love my dad." It's clear though that he doesn't really love his father — the father is merely a lottery ticket.

Likewise, the older son places conditions upon receiving his father's love. While the younger son is blowing through his inheritance, the older son stays home, a faithful servant who keeps all the rules. When the father throws an extremely costly celebration for the return of the younger son, the older son is indignant. He implicitly says that the father is only justified in loving someone who keeps the rules — one who is righteous — and because the father is loving the unrighteous, the older son will not love the father and will not allow the father to love him either.

While we should reflect at length on how we compare to both sons, the main character in this story is indeed the father. He is wholly magnani-

mous and good. He is patient and forgiving. He is sacrificing and welcoming. He is loving.

On Christmas day, the Father shows himself to be all of these things in his son Jesus. Paul calls Jesus “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), so everything we see to be true about Jesus is also true of the Father. God in Christ is wholly magnanimous and good. He is patient and forgiving. He is sacrificing and welcoming. He is loving; “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 John 3:1).

Reflection and Prayer:

We repent of only wanting the things that you can give us rather than delighting in your presence. We repent of our unrighteousness but also of our righteousness that we think will earn your favor and give us rights that we deserve. Like the runaway son, make us aware of our condition that we are completely undeserving of being your children, and yet you run to us with welcoming arms because of what Jesus — the True and Faithful Son — has accomplished for us. Let us live out our identity as your children instead of responding like an orphan who tries to earn your favor and is suspicious of your goodness toward us.

Scripture Reading: Luke 15:11-32; 1 John 3:1-3

DAY 5: COMPASSION

And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. (Matthew 9:35-36)

We can begin to understand the immeasurable depths of God's love for us because of the healing ministry of Jesus and the compassion he showed to the marginalized and the afflicted.

The prophet Isaiah realized that this world, in its current state, is not the way that it was created to be. The existence of blindness, deafness and lameness only reminds us of this. The perfection and shalom (peace) of Genesis 1-2 is brought to complete and utter ruin by man's rebellion against God. In the aftermath, we see in the person of Jesus just how much compassion God has toward his people. Isaiah announces that centuries prior to the manger in Bethlehem, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

Jesus was genuinely and emotionally moved by our suffering. When two blind men asked Jesus to have mercy on them and restore their eyesight, Matthew tells us that "in pity" Jesus touched their eyes and healed them (Matthew 20:29-34).

Perhaps the greatest example of Christ's compassion is at the death of his friend Lazarus. John tells us that when Jesus arrived at Lazarus' house, "Jesus wept." His response is most surprising because Jesus told his disciples even before they arrived that he knew Lazarus had already died. In fact, he says he was glad that he wasn't there to heal him, so that he could bring him back to life so that others might believe in him. So Jesus, glad for the opportunity to show his miraculous power, when he arrives is so distraught by the situation that he weeps. He weeps not at the loss of a friend who is moments away from life, but grieves how the world currently is.

He is distressed by the reality of death and pain, mourning and suffering.

This is not the world that Jesus and his Father had created, and it grieves him.

But this is the very reason that Jesus had come, to begin the work of making all things new. The work of restoration applies to all of Creation, but we see it most personally and poignantly in the way Jesus restores sinners to right relationship with God because of his great love and compassion toward us. And just like Lazarus, God has called us out of death and restored us to new life because of his great love for us.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-7).

This kind of compassion and love toward us should move us to respond in greater love for God and others. The gospel is never about works, but it is about transformation. Many of us around Christmas time sense some sort of obligation to serve those in need, and I think that could be a God-given and good desire stirred in us when we think about how God has moved toward us in his Son. The gospel, however, demands our love and compassion year-round instead of a once-annual obligation. Our action should flow out a deep love for Christ and his work on our behalf. J. D. Greear recommends that we pray to God in this way: “In Christ, there is nothing I could do that would make you love me more, and nothing I have done that makes you love me less. Your presence and approval are all I need today for everlasting joy. As you have been to me, so I will be to others. As I pray, I’ll measure your compassion by the cross and your power by the resurrection.”

This is the kind of prayer that comes from one whose identity is firmly rooted in the love demonstrated in the gospel and will produce real life change.

Reflection and Prayer: “In Christ, there is nothing I could do that would make you love me more, and nothing I have done that makes you love me less. Your presence and approval are all I need today for everlasting joy. As you have been to me, so I will be to others. As I pray, I’ll measure your compassion by the cross and your power by the resurrection.”

