

Illuminating Advent

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Advent Hope

Scripture

Jeremiah 33:14–16 God promises a righteous branch from the line of David who will bring the people safety and hope.

Romans 8:18–25 The future glory of God will be revealed through hope that saves us.

1 Peter 1:3–9 We have a living hope of salvation through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Prayer

O faithful God, in the midst of the darkness of despair, anxiety, or sadness, you bring hope. During long ages your people looked for your promise. They lived toward your word for deliverance, liberation, and safety. We now look and live as well. In Jesus Christ you are the God of hope. We receive all your blessings in him. We look toward your future saved by his life, death, and resurrection. We anticipate the future glory yet to be revealed. We believe your word. We live in faith. We abound in hope! Hear our prayer through Christ. Amen.

Introduction

In the weeks before Christmas, the church celebrates Advent. This season gets its name from the Latin term *adventus*, meaning “coming.” It is a season when the church prepares for Christmas Day—the great celebration of God the Savior coming to us in Jesus Christ. But the four Sundays before Christmas Day also mark a time of waiting and anticipation as the church looks with longing for Christ’s return to reign in glory.

Advent anticipation is often marked in churches by decorations, all the trappings for celebrating Christmas. Many churches feature an Advent wreath. Four candles are set in a circle, often with three purple candles and one that is pink. In the center is the white candle that symbolizes Jesus Christ and is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. At the beginning of worship during Advent Sundays, a Scripture

reading and prayer are often offered as one of the Advent candles is lit. Each week we can see by the lit candles how close we are getting to Christmas day. The Advent wreath is thus a calendar of Advent, marking the time as the church waits for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

In contemporary practice, each of the Advent Sundays is often associated with a theme that captures one dimension of Advent. The four themes are hope, peace, joy, and love. As we wait for Christ's coming, we focus on what Advent brings as Christ comes. These rich biblical and theological terms center us on the message we proclaim as we tell the world of the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

On the first Sunday of Advent, the hope we have in Jesus Christ is rooted in the promises of God we find in the Old Testament. For long centuries, the people of Israel hoped for a messiah, God's "anointed one," the one God chooses to bring blessings to the people (Isaiah 9:1-7).

Our Advent journey begins in hope. Our Christian lives are lived in hope. We look to God's future as people of hope.

Hope in God

The ancient people of Israel were God's people. God entered into a covenant at Mt. Sinai, and in the giving of the law in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20), God reminded the people they had received hope in being liberated from slavery in Egypt (Exodus 20:2). Then God showed the people how they were intended to live. Israel was God's "treasured possession" and a "holy nation" that lived by its trust in God's guidance and help (Exodus 19:5-6).

Israel's hope was focused on God. It had to be. With all the dangers and difficulties they faced, the people realized that only God could be their help (Psalm 124:8). The lives of the righteous people in Israel were grounded in hope. Even when they faced their darkest days, in exile in Babylon, God spoke through Jeremiah the prophet to say, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jeremiah 29:11; cf. 31:17). This promise of God was a certainty for the people, no matter how difficult their circumstances. The prayer of Israel was the prayer of the psalmist: "Let your steadfast love, O LORD, be upon us, even as we hope in you" (Psalm 33:22).

The promise to Israel was that the future belongs to God. The people can hope because of what God can do. Hope brings confidence in God's protection and help. The people trusted the

character of the God who established covenants and promised good to the people, the God who out of steadfast love and faithfulness continually gave to the people in the present.

We find three elements combined in the hope Israel had

in God: expectation of the future, trust, and patience in waiting. These features are combined in the promise God made to Jeremiah of one who brings hope to Israel, a “righteous Branch” from the line of David. This is one who will “execute justice and righteousness in the land.” This one brings the days when “Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety.” This one “will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness’” (Jeremiah 33:14–16).

Israel expected a coming king from the line of King David, to whom God had promised that his offspring would be “made sure forever” (2 Samuel 7:16; cf. vv. 1–17). This coming king would reign in righteousness, in a time of peace where salvation would extend to the world.¹

This coming “messiah” or “anointed one” was expected throughout Israel’s generations. The people trusted God’s promise would come true. They lived from this hope. Even as they waited patiently and expectantly through the generations, Israel hoped in God and believed the promise of the Coming One who would establish a messianic age. This vision was captured in God’s word to the prophet Habakkuk, a vision of the time when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14).

Hope in Jesus Christ

Advent is the season when the church listens to the Old Testament Scriptures as they express hope in God and anticipate God’s coming future. The promises given in the Hebrew Scriptures are not only for the people of Israel but for us as Christians as well. We too hope in God and wait with patience and expectancy, trusting God’s future reign to come.

In Advent, we hear of hope in God, and we anticipate the coming of the One who we believe fulfills all hope and prophecies: Jesus Christ.

1. Old Testament prophecies of the future Davidic king include Isaiah 7:14; 11:1–9; Ezekiel 17:22–24; Micah 5:1–3; Zechariah 9:9–10.

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The Christian church has seen Jesus Christ to be God's Messiah, the "anointed One" from the line of King David who has come to establish God's future kingdom—here in the present and in the days to come. We confess with the apostle Peter who, when Jesus asked him, "Who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are

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the Messiah [Christ], the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Our Christian faith is based on Jesus as the Christ, the "coming king," in whom we now place our hope. As the apostle Paul put it, quoting Isaiah, "The root of Jesse shall

come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope" (Romans 15:12; cf. Isaiah 11:10).

Advent is the time when Christians look to Jesus Christ, in whom all the promises of God find their fulfillment (2 Corinthians 1:20). God is our hope; Christ is our hope. For us in the church, the promise of Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled in Jesus: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us" (Matthew 1:23).

Why do we hope in Jesus Christ? In the New Testament, hope in Christ has three dimensions: past, present, and future.

Past. Christian hope is grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. By the death of Christ our sin is forgiven, and we are reconciled with God. As Paul put it, "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10). Our salvation is possible because of Christ's death to save us. As the hymn puts it, "My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness."²

Present. Christian hope now is a "living hope" that comes "through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Peter 1:3). The church's hope is alive and lived out in its ministries because Jesus Christ is alive and is with the church through the Holy Spirit. Advent is a time to wait in watchful anticipation for the coming of the Son of God who is "God with us" and who is always with us (Matthew 28:20).

Future. Christian hope, grounded in the living Christ, anticipates the future glory to be revealed. As Paul put it, "For in hope we were

2. "My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less," *Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), no. 379.

saved. . . . if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Romans 8:24–25). The fullness of salvation and God’s coming reign will come when God wills. Till then, we anticipate the coming kingdom and work for it, but we wait patiently—in hope.

Hope for Us

On the first Sunday in Advent, we hope. We have a lot of dreams and desires for ourselves, our families, for others, and for the world. There are things we wish to be true and “hope” will be true.

Christian hope encompasses what we wish but brings our hopes and desires within the circle of the hope we have in God and in Jesus Christ. Through the Holy Spirit of God, all God has done and will do becomes open for us. All we wish and hope for becomes part of God’s work in this world and God’s loving presence with us in Jesus Christ. So while our own hopes are real and important, they also point beyond themselves to the hope we have in Jesus Christ as we in the church seek to be Christ’s disciples.

In Advent, we prepare to celebrate the “coming” of Jesus Christ into our world. But Advent is also a time when the church looks to the future and to the “second Advent” or “second coming of Christ.” We affirm in the Apostles’ Creed that Christ will “come again, to judge the quick [living] and the dead.” The first Sunday of Advent points us toward “the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

Christians often speculate about the “second coming” of Christ, trying to figure out the “signs of the time” and to see if current events signal that Christ’s return to earth is near. Yet this focus is misguided. What we do know of Christ’s second coming is that no one knows “that day or hour” (Mark 13:32). Jesus will return at an “unexpected hour” (Luke 12:40). What the church has always believed is that the second coming is imminent—it can happen at any time; but it may not be immediate—it may happen far into the future. The emphasis in the Gospels is on watchfulness and wakefulness (Matthew 24:42; Mark 13:37), being ready—at any time—for Christ to return.

Christ’s advent means hope for us, every day. We celebrate Christ’s coming into the world at Christmas, to live and die and be raised again to forgive our sins and give us new life—“eternal life” (John 3:16) lived in the presence of God by the power of the Holy Spirit. No matter how dark our days or how apparently hopeless our situations may be, our hope is in Jesus Christ who is with us and

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through whose power “all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28).

Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. All our efforts to establish justice, work for peace, and provide for the needs of others find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. All our efforts point beyond themselves to Christ. As the Confession of 1967 puts it, “In the power of the risen Christ and the hope of his coming,

the church sees the promise of God’s renewal of human life in society and of God’s victory over all wrong.”³

This Advent, we can “rejoice in hope” (Romans 12:12).



Spiritual Practice

Think of hopes you have. In what ways do they relate to God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit? During Advent, look for specific ways in which these kinds of hopes can be strengthened. Find ways to share Advent hope with others.



Questions for Reflection

What differences do you see between the hope for a Messiah that Jesus’ contemporaries had and the kind of Messiah that Jesus turned out to be?

In what ways do the three dimensions of hope in Jesus Christ—past, present, and future—shape and impact your Christian hope?

What hope for the world do you see in the coming of Jesus Christ? In what ways can our hopes for God’s future be put into practice now?

3. From the inclusive language version of the Confession of 1967 (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2002), 9.32; available at pcusa.org/resource/inclusive-language-version-confession-1967.