

## **Reconciled: 1. Why We Need Christmas**

**Isaiah 1:2-4; 7:13-14**

**November 29, 2020**

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Today, we begin the season of Advent. It is a Latin word meaning “coming,” and we prepare for the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, whom we know as Jesus. We are preparing to celebrate his birth and at the same time Advent is about the second coming of Jesus and his promise to come back again. Did he mean that literally or metaphorically? Most people throughout history believe it is literal. When that will happen, we don’t know. It could happen in our lifetime or thousands of years from now. But what I know is that Jesus will come back for me at some point in my life, and I will meet him face-to-face. Advent is preparing us for that day whenever it is. I’ve conducted memorial services for people who began their day not knowing that was the day, and I want to be sure I am ready. I want to be sure you are ready for that day when we meet Jesus face-to-face. That’s what Advent is really about. It’s about getting ready for what God wants for you. Are you ready for that?

When I was thirteen, I wanted a guitar. It was the year of Woodstock. Rock and Roll was king, and I wanted to play guitar. But I think back on that time and I realize that it wasn’t really a guitar that I wanted, but what the guitar could produce when it was played like what I heard on the radio. On Christmas morning, I went downstairs and under the tree there was a package that was surely big enough and later that day when my Dad finally handed me the gift, I tore open the package – and there it was – the guitar. This guitar. And I took it out of the case, and strummed my fingers across the strings like I heard on the radio. But it sounded nothing like I thought it would. I was hugely disappointed. There was a Les Paul instruction book that came with the guitar. The first song in the book was “Go Tell Aunt Rhody”. None of the rock and roll guitar players that I knew played “Go Tell Aunt Rhody” and I didn’t want to play it. I couldn’t play it. So I put the guitar back in its case, and it was almost ten years until I took it out again. There was a gift, but I wasn’t ready for it!

That’s the human story, isn’t it? In the beginning, God had an original plan for creation. It was paradise, but Adam and Eve had a better idea. And what came from their idea was sin and its cousins, disobedience, fear, and betrayal. But God did not give up on the original plan, and what we discover from the Bible is that God established a covenant. God said, “I will be your God, if you will be my people.” And the people agreed, but over time, the people kept getting what they thought were better ideas. Humanity kept breaking the covenant and God kept renewing the covenant. Then the people asked God for a king: “If we have a leader that we can see, then we will be faithful.” So, a king was anointed and all twelve tribes of Israel were united, but it didn’t last. They could not get along and the kingdom divided into the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. It wasn’t long before the northern kingdom started a relationship with Syria. Fear had set in and instead of seeking guidance from God, they turned to Syria for guidance and protection because further north the kingdom of Assyria was threatening. But in the meantime, Syria wanted Judah’s help also so that together they could combine forces to overthrow the Assyrian Empire. Judah refuses and instead, King Ahaz, the king of the southern kingdom of Judah reaches out to Assyria (It is not the only time in history that a leader has decided my friend is my enemy’s enemy.)

This is the moment when God calls Isaiah to be his prophet. In the Old Testament, there are 17 different prophets, each one speaking to the people about what God wants for them. Their primary message was repent. They saw kings and leaders were walking away from God, doing what God would not want them to do. And the two sins that the prophets denounced were

idolatry – worshipping something other than God. And injustice – they were not treating others, especially the poor and marginalized with kindness and justice. In Isaiah, chapter 1. Picture a courtroom in which God is judge and prosecuting attorney and the heavens and earth are the jury. The nation of Judah and the people of Jerusalem are on trial. **Hear you heavens, and listen earth, for the Lord has spoken: I reared children; I raised them, and they turned against me! ...They have abandoned the Lord, despised the holy one of Israel; they turned their backs on God.** Isaiah was saying, you have walked away from God, and when you walk away from God you walk away from his protection. Please turn back. Please come back. Follow God's ways. Act with justice. By chapter seven, Isaiah is pleading with the king. Terrible things will happen to the nation and you have no power in the face of the mighty empires to the north. If you don't believe me, Isaiah says **Ask a sign from the Lord your God. Make it as deep as the grave or as high as heaven.**" The sky's the limit! But the king won't do it. Why would he refuse to ask for a sign when God indicates God will provide a sign to prove what God is saying is true? But then I remember I've received gifts and I wasn't ready. I've got my own ideas about what it yet to come. What if I want what God doesn't want? So, the king refuses to ask for a sign, but Isaiah gives him one anyway. **"The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel."** Some believe the young woman is Isaiah's wife and this would be a second son of Isaiah. Others suggest it is one of the king's wives who is to bear the child. But the point is that when the child is born, the countdown to the destruction of the nation has begun. But even then remember the child's name. Remember the name: **Immanuel** – a Hebrew word, meaning **"God with us."** God sends a sign, but neither the king nor anyone else will see it. They do not do what God is calling them to do – and the destruction comes. All God wants is a relationship, but they fail to receive what would bring them back to God. It would be hundreds of years later when the followers of Jesus would return to the words of Isaiah and recognize what God had done – it's Jesus – Immanuel – God with us. God calling us back. God promising to never leave us alone.

Sometimes God shows a sign and we can't see it. Sometimes God tells us a sign and we don't hear it. Even when God himself would come to earth as the sign, we don't open the package. God was saying to the king, I love you. I'm sending myself. I'm going to give you and I'm going to give future generations a sign. Whatever the challenge, whatever the trouble, the road leads to Bethlehem. The sign is an undeniable sign. Immanuel. The word means "God with us" – a relationship. Are you ready for Christmas? It's not presents with a "t", but a presence with a "c".

Earlier this month, game show host, Alex Trebek lost his battle with pancreatic cancer. He was the host of the game show Jeopardy for 37 years. Because the show is recorded weeks in advance, he will continue to host Jeopardy through the end of the year. As part of the Thanksgiving episode of Jeopardy, he offered this posthumous Thanksgiving message. Take a listen. [video] **"Keep the faith, and we will get through this."** It's a similar message to one Isaiah and all of the other prophets delivered 2400 years ago. There are broken places in this world, places that are not as they should be, not as God wants them to be. Where are the broken places in your life that have taken you away from a relationship with God, with family and friends, with the needs of this world. God offers a way back, a way to be reconciled to God, to each other, and to the world.

With just four weeks until Christmas, Amanda sent an email to each member of our family asking what each of us wants for Christmas. And I don't have an answer. If I need something, I get it – and there really is nothing that I need. I remember when our children were little, they had so many toys that we put half of them in a large garbage bag and stored them in the attic – and a few weeks later we would give them that garbage bag of toys and gather up all of the other toys and put them in the attic. They didn't need anything. They had more than they needed, so

we kept recycling what they already had – and they were happy. For most of us, we don't need Christmas to get stuff. Over the next month it is estimated that Americans will spend \$30 billion on holiday spending and most of us don't need what we are buying and much of it will be returned because we don't want it. What if we were to give away to the poor and marginalized, to the people who actually need food and clothing and shelter. I think you understand this. Last week, I told you how 25% of what you have given to this church has been given to those in need. Since March, our office hallway has become a food shelf for families in our child care who experience food insecurity. You have made mortgage payments for people at risk of losing their homes. You've gone into Minneapolis to partner with Iglesia Piedra Viva to assist families in need. You are also in Kenya, providing hope and a future to young women and their children. And on Christmas Eve, we will be giving away our entire Christmas offering.

What if you were to give away an amount equal to what you will spend on your family for Christmas so that you could bless children in need. 50% of our Christmas offering will remain here in this community and 50% will care for children in Kenya. To do that we might have to simplify and reassess what we are doing. That's why we need Christmas. God recognized that words alone and intentions alone were not enough, so God became flesh to live among us and show us the way back, to turn our hearts to God; to be reconciled to those we have hurt; to respond to the needs of the world. We need Christmas. The question is "are we ready to receive it?"

### **Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 29, 2020**

**Weekly Prayer:** Dear God, we give thanks for those who bring to us a message of hope and show us a future we cannot see. Help us to open our hearts to your gift of hope. Amen.

### **Monday, November 30**

#### **Scripture: Isaiah 9:1-7**

Nonetheless, those who were in distress won't be exhausted. At an earlier time, God cursed the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but later he glorified the way of the sea, the far side of the Jordan, and the Galilee of the nations. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned. You have made the nation great; you have increased its joy. They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest, as those who divide plunder rejoice. As on the day of Midian, you've shattered the yoke that burdened them, the staff on their shoulders, and the rod of their oppressor. Because every boot of the thundering warriors, and every garment rolled in blood will be burned, fuel for the fire. A child is born to us, a son is given to us, and authority will be on his shoulders. He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace. There will be vast authority and endless peace for David's throne and for his kingdom, establishing and sustaining it with justice and righteousness now and forever. The zeal of the LORD of heavenly forces will do this.

**Observation:** Isaiah has been called by God to deliver a tough message about the consequences of disobedience. The Assyrian Empire was expanding its territory and the northern kingdom of Israel lay in its path. The southern kingdom of Judah would also experience a similar fate – its people killed or taken into exile in Babylon. But Isaiah also offered God's message of hope. In the midst of destruction and suffering, there would come a light. Hundreds of years later, as the followers of Jesus turned to the writings of the prophet Isaiah, they would see the promise that Jesus and his salvation would be a light for the Gentiles.

**Application:** Isaiah's vision of what will be reads as if it has already taken place. Such is the promise of God. God is committed to accomplishing God's purposes. You and I may not see that yet, but God is committed to achieving what God has promises. That is true for today as well. There may be places in your life where you see no evidence that God is doing anything, but God can see and God is already working.

**Prayer:** Gracious and merciful God, give me the confidence that I need to know that I can trust you today, tomorrow and forever. I offer my life to you once again. Lead me in your way. Amen.

## Tuesday, December 1

### Scripture: Isaiah 40:3-5

A voice is crying out: "Clear the LORD's way in the desert! Make a level highway in the wilderness for our God! Every valley will be raised up, and every mountain and hill will be flattened. Uneven ground will become level, and rough terrain a valley plain. The LORD's glory will appear, and all humanity will see it together; the LORD's mouth has commanded it."

**Observation:** Paving on most ancient roads, if any, was rocks or logs, much bumpier than modern roads. When a king traveled from his palace, he would often send work parties to level the highest and lowest spots so he could travel more swiftly and comfortably. Isaiah alluded to that custom to promise spiritual preparation for God to come to God's people.

**Application:** The exiled prophet Ezekiel saw a vision of ugly pagan worship right in the Jerusalem Temple. Then he saw a poignant image of God's presence sadly leaving the Temple and city (*The Lord's glory ascended from the middle of the city, and it stopped at the mountain east of the city.* Ezekiel 11:23). As the exile ended, today's prophet's message was "God intends to return to the city, and in the second paragraph a voice thus commissions freeway contractors to carve out a highway to take God back." Even when we've pushed God away, God never gives up on us. How does God's tireless love speak to your heart?

**Prayer:** Lord God, sometimes I mistakenly think you're looking for any excuse to leave my life. Thank you for the powerful reminder in Isaiah that, in fact, you're always eager to pave a road back into my heart and my life. Amen.

## Wednesday, December 2

### Scripture: Malachi 4:2, 4-6

But the sun of righteousness will rise on those revering my name; healing will be in its wings so that you will go forth and jump about like calves in the stall.

Remember the Instruction from Moses, my servant, to whom I gave Instruction and rules for all Israel at Horeb. Look, I am sending Elijah the prophet to you, before the great and terrifying day of the LORD arrives. Turn the hearts of the parents to the children and the hearts of the children to their parents. Otherwise, I will come and strike the land with a curse.

**Observation:** Yesterday's and today's prophetic readings seem fairly general. (For example, neither said "God will send a man named John the Baptist to prepare the way for Jesus.") As we learned in Pastor Steve's message on Sunday, many Old Testament texts quoted in the New Testament had an initial fulfillment nearer the time of the prophet. Others were not predictive texts at all. The New Testament authors saw in these statements a foreshadowing of the life

and ministry of Jesus. Jesus offered a completion of what these ancient words meant because Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promised saving work in the world.

**Application:** Malachi was the only Old Testament writer to use the expression "the sun of righteousness" (but he built on the poetic image in Psalm 84:11 - *The Lord is a sun and shield; God is favor and glory*). The phrase seemed to clearly show that all that has been darkened by sin will become light in the Lord. In what ways has your walk with God brought greater light into your life? What are some darker corners of your life or your community's life into which you could shine God's light during Advent?

**Prayer:** Lord God, you have communicated to the human family in so many ways (and supremely in Jesus). Give me a heart open to letting your light shine in and illuminate every part of my life. Amen.

### Thursday, December 3

#### Scripture: Luke 1:5-25

During the rule of King Herod of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron. They were both righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to become pregnant and they both were very old. One day Zechariah was serving as a priest before God because his priestly division was on duty. Following the customs of priestly service, he was chosen by lottery to go into the Lord's sanctuary and burn incense. All the people who gathered to worship were praying outside during this hour of incense offering. An angel from the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear. The angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayers have been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord's eyes. He must not drink wine and liquor. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers back to their children, and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord." Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure of this? My wife and I are very old." The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen." Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and they wondered why he was in the sanctuary for such a long time. When he came out, he was unable to speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he gestured to them and couldn't speak. When he completed the days of his priestly service, he returned home. Afterward, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant. She kept to herself for five months, saying, "This is the Lord's doing. He has shown his favor to me by removing my disgrace among other people."

**Observation:** Because there were an estimated 18,000 priests, special duties had to be assigned by lot. This was likely Zechariah's only opportunity to perform this service during his lifetime. The angel's message must have reminded the aged priest of the prophet Malachi's words we read yesterday. In the ancient world, childless parents lacked support in their old age, and many people assumed that such a condition reflected divine punishment for sin. That's why Luke stressed that "they were righteous before God." It was why Elizabeth said God had showed favor by "removing my disgrace among other people."

**Application:** Several times in the Advent story, we hear a call to not be afraid. When Zechariah saw the angel, he was startled and overcome with fear” (verse 12). That fear made it hard for him to trust the angel’s good news (verse 19). Yet the angel’s first words were, “Don’t be afraid, Zechariah” (verse 13). “Don’t be afraid” is the most common Bible command from God and God’s messengers. This Advent, in what part(s) of life do you most need to take in the message, “Do not be afraid”?

**Prayer:** Great God, sometimes the vast scope of your purposes, so much deeper or bigger than my ordinary life, frightens me. Teach me how to hold myself ready to whatever you have in mind. Amen.

#### **Friday, December 4**

##### **Scripture: Luke 1:57-66**

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father’s name. But his mother replied, “No, his name will be John.” They said to her, “None of your relatives have that name.” Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him. After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, “His name is John.” At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God. All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. All who heard about this considered it carefully. They said, “What then will this child be?” Indeed, the Lord’s power was with him.

**Observation:** What a series of events! The aged priest unable to speak after offering incense at the Temple, the woman all the neighbors knew couldn’t have children visibly pregnant. In a small-town setting, those things would attract a lot of attention. Then the baby was born, and as soon as the father and mother agreed on an unexpected name, Zechariah could speak again! No wonder Luke reported, “Everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened.”

**Application:** Zechariah gave up the highly-prized honor of naming his son after himself to obey God. John’s calling was not to follow his father as a priest. He challenged some of the customs and teachings of those religious leaders. And John’s ministry was to point to someone greater, not to his own virtues or strengths. What inner qualities did Zechariah and John need to live out God’s call without resentment or bitterness? How can you nurture those qualities in your life?

**Prayer:** Lord God, we read about how Jesus “emptied himself” (Philippians 2:5-11). Zechariah and John also had to do that to follow your call. Keep me from being so “full of myself” that I refuse the role you call me to play in your great mission. Amen.

#### **Saturday, December 5**

##### **Scripture: Luke 1:67-80**

John’s father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, “Bless the Lord God of Israel because he has come to help and has delivered his people. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David’s house, just as he said through the mouths of his holy prophets long ago. He has brought salvation from our enemies and from the power of all those who hate us. He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and remembered his holy

covenant, the solemn pledge he made to our ancestor Abraham. He has granted that we would be rescued from the power of our enemies so that we could serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness in God's eyes, for as long as we live. You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way. You will tell his people how to be saved through the forgiveness of their sins. Because of our God's deep compassion, the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace." The child grew up, becoming strong in character. He was in the wilderness until he began his public ministry to Israel.

**Observation:** When John the Baptist was born, his father's song of praise didn't first acclaim his own son, but the one for whom John would prepare the way. God, he declared, "has raised up a mighty savior for us in his servant David's house....He has brought salvation...he has shown mercy." Then, perhaps remembering Malachi's phrase "the sun of righteousness," he said his infant son would proclaim "the dawn from heaven will break upon us, to give light to those who are sitting in darkness."

**Application:** Rome occupied all of Israel in Zechariah's day. In verse 71 he said God "has brought salvation from our enemies." Zechariah's vision goes beyond simply a realigning of political powers. God's mercy, the forgiveness of sins, the rescue from death itself; all of this points to a deeper and wider meaning of salvation. God would reconcile the whole world. How did John prepare the way for one who would deliver all humans in ways a political revolution could not?

**Prayer:** Lord God, sometimes I'm like the person who prayed, "God, give me patience, and do it right now!" Help Zechariah's song to remind me that, in the end, you always keep your promises, and that those moments are worth waiting for. Amen.