

HE COMES, BEARING *gifts*



A Sermon Series for the Sundays in Advent

"Curly head dolls that toddle and coo. Elephants, boats, and kiddie cars too. Santa Claus is comin' to town." You'll hear those lyrics often during the holiday season—a song about a man who's coming to bring all sorts of gifts. But, are they really gifts? The definition of a gift is "something given voluntarily without payment or condition." The man in red has conditions. You better watch out. You better not cry. You better not pout. He knows if you've been bad or good, so be good... If you give someone a gift only if they meet certain qualifications, that is not a gift. There is one who is coming, bearing real gifts, profoundly important gifts. Jesus came that first Christmas to win forgiveness and give all the gifts that come with it: hope, peace, joy, love. He is coming again at the end of this world to give you the gift of resurrection to eternal life. In the season of Advent, we connect Christ's first coming with his second coming. We rejoice in all the unconditional gifts he gives. Walking together with the brothers and sisters of our church body, we strive to share those gifts with one-million souls this holy season. He is coming, bearing gifts. Let us prepare our hearts...and the hearts of others...to meet him.

First Sunday of Advent (December 1st-3rd) *The Gift of Hope*

When you look at the downward spiral of humanity, it is easy to grow cynical. The world seems to grow more dangerous each year. People are more divided than they have been in a long time. Immorality is no longer something that people try to hide. As a nation, we have become largely disinterested in God. Disgusted by the world, we then look in the mirror, and things do not improve much. For we confess that we are not pillars of nobility and virtue either. Looking at our world or at ourselves, it is easy to become jaded. But today, Christ Jesus wants us to set that aside and, instead, to live in hope. Our hope is not a naïve wish that things will get better. Our hope is rooted in the fact that Christ came at that first Christmas to forgive every sin. Our hope is that just as he kept his promise to come the first time, Jesus will keep his promise to come again and destroy everything that is wrong with Creation. Judgment Day will be full of incomprehensible terror for those who have aligned themselves with the world. But Christians hope that day comes soon. Confident that we are wrapped in Christ's righteousness, it will be a day of great deliverance.

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Second Sunday of Advent (December 8th-10th) *The Gift of Peace*

How do you feel when meeting someone important? Maybe it was a job interview with your potential future boss. Did you feel peaceful walking into that meeting? Or perhaps you were summoned, for a reason unknown to you, to come to the principal's office at school? As you walked the hallway towards his door, were you at peace? When we come face-to-face with someone who can influence the direction of our lives, that tends to be nerve wracking, not peaceful. How nervous will you be, then, when you stand face-to-face with your God, who will determine where you spend eternity? God is much more than a boss or a principal. He is your Creator, the one who gave you life. And when he did, he intended you to use that life in a very specific way, one which would bring glory to him and beauty to this broken world. So, are you ready to meet him? Today, we see that God wants you to be at perfect peace when you stand before him. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace..." the angels sang that first Christmas Eve. Through the work of Christ, sinners are at peace with a holy God. Even more, throughout history God's messengers like John the Baptist proclaimed the gospel, so that God's people could live in peace. God raises up a messenger to preach that gospel to you today.

Third Sunday of Advent (December 15th-17th) *The Gift of Joy*

The ancient church had Latin titles for all their Sundays. They called the third Sunday in Advent "Gaudete Sunday." The Latin word gaudete means rejoice. On some Advent wreaths, the third candle is a pinkish rose color, symbolizing joy. An encouragement to rejoice might sound odd in light of this Advent season's themes, especially Christ's second coming to this world. We have seen that when Jesus comes again he is going to judge all mankind and destroy the universe. Even the gospel reading for today warns about "the coming wrath" which will include "unquenchable fire." If that is what Christ will bring at his second coming, how can we possibly live joyfully? Answer: because of Christ's first coming. When Jesus came that first Christmas, it wasn't to bring judgment, but to bear judgment. Jesus was born, not to punish sin, but to be punished for sin. All those with faith in Christ know that when he comes for the second time, it will be to deliver us, not destroy us. He will not increase our pain but take every pain away. Then, and not a moment before, our lives will finally be perfect! And so, we live joyfully and thankfully, looking forward to Christ's return.

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Fourth Sunday of Advent (December 22nd-23rd) *The Gift of Love*

Love is rarely a gift. Typically, when you love someone, it is because you get something in return. You love your spouse in part because of the support and affection he shows to you. You love your favorite teacher because of what she gives you by making learning enjoyable. You love your dog because he is a loyal companion. In such cases, love is not a gift. It is something that is merited...deserved. Now, if you loved a spouse who always treated you like dirt, loved a teacher who taught you nothing, loved a dog that daily bit you, then your love would be a gift. If you love someone who gives you nothing in return, who makes your existence more difficult, then your love is a gift. You are showing undeserved love, which Scripture calls grace. Love is rarely a gift. However, with God, his love is always a gift. God the Father looks at humanity and he sees us doing the evil we should not do. Just as bad, he sees us failing to do the good that we ought to do. Do we make God's existence easier? No. Instead, God the Son took on human flesh and suffered and died to make atonement for our sins. Yet, he did so gladly. Why? Love! Love that is undeserved. The gift of love!

Christmas Eve (December 24th) *A Light in the Darkness*

A light shines in the darkness, bursting forth into our hearts and lives as the Word is made flesh. The glory of the Lord marks the fulfillment of promise as the Light of the world is born into the world. We who have been purified and brought into the Light reflect that light in our present age. We proclaim what we have seen and heard: "A Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."