

# Advent



**Celebrating the Coming of Our Lord**  
**Santa Barbara Community Church 2010**

# Advent

## Introduction

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This year, Costco put out its Christmas items before Halloween. Artificial trees, ornaments, lights, cards, and wrapping paper – all for sale in September. Our culture waits for Christmas with eager displays of retail merchandise and a barrage of advertising.

As Christian people, how do we wait for Christmas? How do we set ourselves apart from the culture around us? The traditions and Scripture of Advent provide the shape and the guidance for how we wait. The word “advent” literally means “arrival” and it symbolizes a period of waiting, both for the advent of Christ’s birth, and the second advent of His return. The aim of this study is to remind ourselves of the startling truth that God loved us so much that he became one of us through the birth of his Son, Jesus. This is an undeniable historical event, fixed in time and place. The earth we walk has been walked on by God himself!

J.B. Phillips puts it this way:

What we are in fact celebrating is the awe-inspiring humility of God, and no amount of familiarity with the trappings of Christmas should ever blind us to its quiet but explosive significance. For Christians believe that so great is God’s love and concern for humanity that he himself became a man. Amid the sparkle and the color and music of

**Lo, in the silent night  
A child to God is born  
And all is brought again  
That ere was lost or lorn.**

**Could but thy soul, O man,  
Become a silent night!  
God would be born in thee  
And set all things aright.**

-15th century (author unknown)-

the day's celebration we do well to remember that God's insertion of himself into human history was achieved with an almost frightening quietness and humility.<sup>1</sup>

We will all probably buy and receive presents this year; some of us will send cards; some will go to Christmas parties; and every one of us will have trouble finding parking spaces downtown. But amidst the festivities, what will be different about us this year? Hopefully, we will determine to step aside from the frenzy enough so that we can recapture a sense of awe at how God has revealed himself, pursuing us down to our humanity to become one of us.

Be intentional about keeping Christ at the center of this season!

**About this study:** For families with children, please look to the back of the study where you will find a "Family Resources" page. In it, you will find ideas and information on how to bring the celebration of Advent into your home. Also, your children will be bringing home "Talkabout" cards each week from Sunday School. These provide good questions and activities, as well.

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1 J.B. Phillips, *Good News: Thoughts on God & Man*, MacMillan, 1963.

# Hope!

## Walk in the light of the Lord



Hope is born of yearning. For Christians, hope is yearning with purpose – hope has its eyes fixed on a Rescuer and a Redeemer. Hope waits, knowing that the Rescuer and Redeemer will ultimately set things right. The first week of Advent is a reminder that our hope is in Christ alone, God’s one and only Son, the Savior of the world.

Our Scripture for this week gives us a historical backdrop for this hope through the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah’s prophetic ministry began about 742 B.C, and he was the first prophet to foretell the birth of Christ. For nearly forty years Isaiah made prophetic announcements, pleading with God’s people to turn from their sin, idolatries, and greed.<sup>1</sup> His entire ministry was spent trying to prepare Israel for the arrival of God’s Son, the Messiah. First, Isaiah gives them the bad news: Their sin and rebellion had summoned judgment in the form of a fierce enemy raised up by God against his people. He says the following in 5:26, 30:

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<sup>1</sup> During Isaiah’s ministry, the nation of Israel divided into two kingdoms, Israel (northern kingdom), and Judah (southern kingdom). Judah in particular experienced a time of great prosperity, and with their new wealth and comfort, they became hardened by sin.

*He will raise a signal for a nation afar off, and whistle for it from the ends of the earth; and lo, swiftly, speedily it comes! . . . And if one looks to the land, behold, darkness and distress; and the light is darkened by its clouds*

That's the bad news.

Then, Isaiah sets up the good news . . .

Read these texts with the following outline in mind:

Isaiah 2:1-5: What Zion was *meant* to be;  
Isaiah 4:2-6: What Zion has *become*; and  
Isaiah 9:2-7: What Zion will *yet* be.

### **Isaiah 2:1–5; What Zion was meant to be.<sup>1</sup>**

Depending upon the translation you are using, count how many times you see the words “shall” or “will be.”

What is the first command quoted in this passage?

What is the purpose stated in that command?

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<sup>1</sup> “Zion”. *Zion* is a Hebrew word for which the definition is not clearly known. It most likely means “citadel” or “fortress.” In Scripture, *Zion* either refers to the physical city of Jerusalem (which occupies a high ridge), or it has a more metaphorical meaning, pointing to the security and protection of God’s dwelling place, or the eternal *Zion*.

What are the stated results?

What is the final invitation?

At the most practical level, what are these passages asking of you at this season of your life?

### **Isaiah 4:2-6; What Zion has become:**

Why is God displeased with his people in this passage? Name the broad categories.

What parallels do you find in our culture? Be specific.

What parallels do you find in your own heart?

## Isaiah 9:2-7; What Zion will yet be:

To what kind of “darkness” do you think Isaiah is referring?

The light referred to here is the light of the incarnation<sup>1</sup>, God came to dwell among us through his son, Jesus. List the promises that come as a result of this “great light.”

Startling promises of peace are injected into images of oppression, war, blood, and violence. With that in mind, think about how v. 6 must have puzzled Isaiah’s listeners!

List the five kingly names given to this Savior. Find at least one verse from another portion of Scripture that illustrates or expands on one of these names.

Hope is distinct from “wishing.” In your reading from Isaiah this week, how has your view of hope been altered?

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:4-5

Respond to the following quote from C.S. Lewis:

Hope...means...a continual looking forward to the eternal world... It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history, you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. ...It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get earth "thrown in": aim at earth and you will get neither.<sup>1</sup>

What does this quote mean to you?

Think about what our culture focuses on during the Christmas season. List a few of those things to which you are particularly "vulnerable." Next, think about what value with which you can replace that vulnerability, especially if it is one that brings God's hope to another. (example: "need to give gifts to everyone who gives one to me".... Replace with "donations made in your friend's name to help the needy", etc...)

Cultural vulnerability

Replacement

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<sup>1</sup> *Mere Christianity*, p. 118.

The Christmas season in our American culture tends to amplify those things in which we have placed our hope. Just watch a few TV ads, and you could begin to make a list --- happy, intact families; luxurious gifts. . . you can add to this list on your own. The whole point of the Gospel is that our longings, and our true *hope* can only be fulfilled through Christ, who is Emmanuel – *God with us*.

Pray Hebrews 10:23-24 as a group:

*Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*

# Peace!

## Listening for God's Messengers



### Read Luke 1:5–25

The historical context for this story of Elizabeth & Zechariah is Roman-occupied Israel under the reign of Herod the Great. The time between the thunderous prophecies of Isaiah had been centuries past. In fact, there is an almost eerie silence in the biblical record for about 400 years.

In this passage, we see Zechariah performing his priestly duties, around the year 4 B.C. During this period of history, there were 24 divisions of priests who served for a week at a time, twice a year. Each morning and evening, incense would be lighted in the holy place of the temple by an individual priest. A priest was only allowed this privilege once (if that) in his lifetime. For Zechariah, his entrance into the holy of holies was not a perfunctory duty, but probably the high point of his life as a priest.

Write down the important details of this portion of Scripture:

Who meets Zechariah at the altar of incense?

What is said say to him there?

To what prayer is the angel referring?

List the things we learn about this son who is to be born?

Why is Zechariah struck mute by the angel?

While Zechariah is in the most holy place, we are told in verse 10 that *all the assembled worshipers were praying outside*. It was believed that when a priest entered the holy of holies (or innermost part of the temple), that he would be immediately killed if God were to show Himself. Often a priest would enter with a rope tied around his ankles (with bells on the rope), so that – should he be struck down – the other priests could pull his body out. Think about the response of those gathered outside when Zechariah emerges, making signs to them but unable to speak. Surely, he has seen a vision of the Lord!

Think now about Elizabeth. She becomes pregnant and immediately attributes the pregnancy to God's grace. She has not encountered an angel, or been given evidence of God's purpose in this pregnancy, but she immediately points to God and His favor.

Do you see yourself as more of a *Zechariah* or an *Elizabeth* in the face of God's evident work in your life?

## **Read Luke 1:57-80**

At the birth of John, notice that Luke describes people's spontaneous reactions three different times. Write down those responses.

At what point is Zechariah's voice restored?

What is his first response?

As the Holy Spirit had filled Elizabeth, he now fills Zechariah. His discipline under the Lord has been lifted and Zechariah sings. Zechariah's song (or *benedictus*) has two distinct parts. Where do you find the division of these two parts, and how would you describe each?

Compare the following verses:

Luke 1:76

Isaiah 40:3

Malachi 3:1

Write down what these verses have to say about John the Baptist's role and purpose.

This week in Advent, we light the candle of peace. Colossians 3:15 says: Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body, you were called to peace. And be thankful. Take some time to consider and pray about what it means to "let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts."

# Joy!

## Proclaim God's Greatness!



*Revelation.* When we hear the word, we may automatically think of the last book of the Bible, but Luke also is a book of revelation. In our last study we saw God reveal himself to Zechariah, promising him a son, John the Baptist.

In this study, we again see God revealing Himself, this time to a young girl, Mary. She is told the unimaginable – that she will be the mother of God's Son, Jesus. Everything that follows from this point—the nativity, the shepherd's rejoicing, the trek of the wise men – rests on the theological foundation of this revelation. Gabriel, sent as God's messenger, revealed God's plan, which involved the least likely "vessel" – a poor girl from an agrarian "nowhere" town, a virgin in her teens engaged to a poor man.

### **Read Luke 1:26–38**

Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her that she has "found favor" with the Lord. No merits, however, or reasons for this favor are given. He simply reassures her that she is the one. There is no mistaking it.

How has God shown *you* His favor? Have you resisted it? If so, how?

Gabriel then goes on to tell Mary about the Son she will deliver. He makes astonishing claims about this baby. List all the claims you find.

Mary speaks only twice in this encounter with the angel. What does she say?

Mary's last statement was no simple matter. Her pre-wedding pregnancy could, at best, result in mockery and rejection by her family. At worst, it could bring a death sentence. However, her calm confidence is in the fact that the Lord has chosen her, and He will take care of her.

Respond to the following quote by Darrel Bock:

Mary reflects the person whom God unexpectedly chooses to use. She brings no outstanding credentials to the task and lives on the edge of the nation. She brings nothing on her resume other than her availability and willingness to serve. But those characteristics are the most basic ones anyone can offer God. So he puts her to use in his plan, taking her through a process for which she has had no training or preparation. He simply promises to be with her on the journey, and she responds by being willing to go on the ride. . . .With God's grace behind her, Mary knows that she can do what God asks.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Darrel L. Bock, NIV Application Commentary, p.59.

How well do you make yourself “available and willing to serve” God? What are some of the obstacles that keep you from growing in this area?

## Read Luke 1:39-56

This interesting portion of Luke is divided into two parts. First is the encounter of Mary’s visit with Elizabeth. The second part is Mary’s hymn, or *Magnificat* of praise.

We are told that *Mary got ready and hurried to the hill country of Judah* to see Elizabeth. This journey would not have been a short or easy one, but think about the fullness of Mary’s heart – she would be bursting with this strange and wonderful news, and probably eager to share it with the one person who might understand!

When Mary greets Elizabeth, we are told in verse 41 that the *baby leaped in her womb* and that *Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit*. What are the statements that Elizabeth makes? You should find five – one being a question.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

How do these statements reveal a growing peace in Elizabeth's heart?

How would these statements have encouraged Mary?

Read again Mary's song of praise, verses 46-55. It is notable that Mary spends very little time reflecting on her circumstances in this song. She does, however, gush forth praise to God for who He is and what He has done. List those things for which Mary gives God praise:

We witness in Mary's praise a joy that is grounded in the peace-filled acceptance of God's sovereignty and God's care. He chose her. He is including her in His plan. He will take care of her. ...Joy... Think of your own life in these terms:

He chose you.

He is including you in His plan.

He will take care of you.

The gift God gave to Mary – bearing the Son of God – was also a tremendous burden. In the culture in which Mary lived, this gift could have meant her death. If nothing else, it would immensely complicate her relationship with Joseph, and create great confusion among her family and friends. And yet, Mary says, *I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.* And then her song of praise and joy...

In our culture, the Christmas season aims for *happiness*. Joy is another matter entirely. Joy is a settled delight in God's purpose and God's presence. Joy defies our circumstances because it transcends them. One could even say that joy is longing and contentment commingled; we long for the fullness of God's restoration of things, and we delight in His presence with us right now. *Emmanuel*, "God with us" – this is the joy Mary celebrated, and this is our joy.

*Though you have not seen him, you love him;  
and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him  
and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,  
for you are receiving the goal of your faith,  
the salvation of your souls.*                      1 Peter 1:8-9



# Love!

Jesus is Born – Celebrate!



**Read Luke 2:1-20**

*King, Savior, Deliverer, Mighty One.* The birth of one described as such should involve a noble setting, the best in medical attention, royal fanfare, and wonderful gifts. And yet, God chose every detail of setting, circumstance, and participant to communicate humility. Each part of the Christmas story reflects God's "Great Humility" – His condescension to become one of us. This incarnation story is a study in contrasts. Fill in the blanks below:

Instead of a birth attended by midwives we find:

Instead of birth announcements to royalty we find:

Instead of the musical accolades of flutes and lyres we find:

The first thing we read in this account is that an angel appears to the shepherds who are watching over their sheep at night. As is true with all angelic appearances in Scripture, the angel first tells the shepherds, *Do not be afraid*.

Name what follows:

The reassurance (verse 10):

The announcement (verse 11):

The sign (verse 12):

The titles that the angel gives to the newborn child are significant.

*Savior*: One who will rescue his people

*Christ (Messiah)*: the promised one/deliverer.

*Lord*: Of the three titles, this may be the most mysterious in this context. The title, however, hints to what will unfold in the remainder of this Gospel and the book of Acts.

What is the response of the shepherds to this good news?

Is there anything in their response you would want to emulate? If so, what is it?

This humble birth fulfills numerous Old Testament prophecies. Among them, Isaiah declared (7:14), *The Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel.*"

This is specific information of which the shepherds and townspeople may have been familiar. Less familiar is the historical context of this declaration by Isaiah. Isaiah had been pleading with King Ahaz to put his trust in God's power rather than alliances with military powers from other nations. Isaiah says to Ahaz, *If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all* (7:9).

And what does Isaiah offer as reassurance of God's power? A baby. Ahaz must have been incredulous, wringing his hands as Assyria breathed down his neck. What he needed was a strong army, not a baby!

Ahaz needed a rescuer. Later, Israel longed for the Messiah to deliver them from Roman oppression. Even now, human nature impels us to desire something/someone to "make things better." We all think we know what we need. God, however, knows our deepest and most critical need. Read the following verses, and be reminded of the *true* meaning of Christmas:

Luke 19:10

John 3:17

1 Peter 2:24

What happened in that stable over two millennia ago was a gift from God. It was the greatest gift of all, his own Son, Jesus, who was sent to live among us, minister to and teach us and, ultimately, to die for us. It was a gift of pure – perfectly pure – love. Christmas in our culture, on the other hand, has watered down that Great Gift, by becoming a season of many gifts. We have stories of the miserly becoming generous during this season and stories of Santa delivering vast amounts of presents. We say when our children become toddlers that “This is going to be a great Christmas,” because we will get to witness their delight as they open their presents. We love this season because we love to be givers.

That first Christmas, there was only one Giver – God himself. Read and respond to the following quote:

...I suggest that we are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people but because we are proud, arrogant people. The Christmas story – the one according to Luke not Dickens – is not about how blessed it is to be givers but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers.<sup>1</sup>

How can you better be a receiver of this gift from God? What life *toxins* do you need to shed this Christmas? What sins do you need to confess in order that you can worship the Holy One who came to save you? Take a moment to list them here, and pray through that list...

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1 William Willimon, reprinted from Dec., 1988 issue of *Christian Century*..

As we celebrate the Advent (arriving) of Jesus' birth, we also celebrate the Advent of his return, when all things will be set right, all things restored and when we will enjoy His presence forever!

*...so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him. Hebrews 9:28*



# Advent Family Resources

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## I. Advent Wreath:

The never-ending circle of greenery reminds us of God's unending love and the source of our hope. The lighting of more candles each week reminds us of the arrival of Christ's light into a dark and broken world.

This study guide follows this pattern:

- Study 1 – candle of Hope
- Study 2 – candle of Peace
- Study 3 – candle of Joy
- Study 4 – candle of Love

The 5<sup>th</sup> candle, or Christ candle, is traditionally lit on Christmas Eve.

Supplies:

- 6-8 evergreen boughs between 6" to 12" long
- Wire coat hanger
- Lots of green twist ties
- 3 purple candles (about 10" since they will be lit for several weeks)
- 1 pink candle and 1 white candle
- 5 small candle holders, or 5 lumps of clay to hold candles

Directions:

1. Shape coat hanger into a circle. Bend the hook toward the center of the circle or clip it off.
2. Fasten boughs to coat hanger with twist ties.
3. Put candles into holders (see above).
4. Place candles into the wreath.

## 2. “Krist Kindl”

Krist Kindl is German for “Christ Child.” It refers to an activity during Advent in which you try to share Christ’s love with others in your household.

Write everyone’s name on a piece of paper. Put the papers in a container. Each person is to draw out a name and keep it secret. The name will be your Advent friend. You will have the chance to do things secretly for this person in the name of the Christ Child. It could be a chore, note, homemade gift, kind word, or prayer. It should never be a bought gift.

You may draw new names each Sunday in Advent or keep the same name all month. Reveal identities at Christmas!

## 3. Jesse Tree (Isaiah 11:1, Matt. 1:1-17)

A family tree shows the names of the relatives who lived before us. The family tree of Jesus is called the Jesse Tree because Jesus came from the family of King David, whose father was Jesse.

Each day, an ornament symbolic of the family tree of Jesus, is put onto the tree. Each ornament represents a portion of Scripture that foretells the coming Messiah.

To learn how to make or own Jesse Tree with ornaments (or better yet, to have a Jesse Tree ornament exchange), google “Jesse Tree Instructions” and have fun!

