

Advent



Celebrating the Coming of Our Lord
Santa Barbara Community Church 2011

Advent

Introduction

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son
from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

John 1:14

Have you ever noticed how a change in the seasons affects your mood and provokes your memory? The long shadows of autumn take us back to some good memories of being with our friends on the playground in elementary school. Shorter days keep us indoors for more hours of the evening and this brings back a memory of time with our family as we were growing up. The green hills of Santa Barbara in early winter give us a sense of anticipation and longing for the full-bloomed brightness of spring. The fog of June makes us realize that the heat of summer is just around the corner.

As the planet earth has a seasonal calendar, so also does the church. Throughout the history of the Christian Church the cycle of the liturgical year was and is instrumental in teaching the biblical stories of God's redemptive work in the world to a people who might otherwise forget the great acts of God.

The Advent season marks the beginning of the ecclesiastical year. Advent begins the 4th Sunday before Christmas and culminates in the celebration of the birth of Christ. And Advent is only the beginning. Advent looks forward to Lent, a time to anticipate the crucifixion of the God-man Jesus. The Lenten season culminates with Holy Week and Easter Sunday. But that is not the end either. Following Easter, the church looks forward to Ascension Sunday and, finally, Pentecost Sunday (Acts 2). Then the cycle begins again the following year.

The celebration of Advent is not a biblical mandate, but rather a helpful reminder of who we are and whose we are. The Apostle Paul tells us we have been bought with a price by this Jesus who became a baby and was born in Bethlehem (1 Corinthians 6:20). Advent begins to explain how great a price Jesus paid for our purchase.

The word Advent comes from the Latin *adventus*, meaning coming or arrival. The focus of the season is upon the birth of Jesus in his First Advent and the future return of Christ in his Second Advent. The biblical Greek term for the second advent of Jesus is *parousia* which usually means presence but can also mean coming or arrival. When we recognize Advent, therefore, we are not only mindful of the First and Second Advents of our savior, but also his unique and powerful presence in our lives today. A focus on the past and the future must affect our lives in the here and now.

Celebration, Anticipation, Self-Examination

Advent is a time of celebration. The infinite God of the universe became one of us that we might know him. Jesus came that we might know our heavenly Father. He was born in a far away land into the humblest of circumstances for the express purpose of redeeming the world from sin and reconciling humanity to himself. Advent is a celebration of the incarnation of Christ. And the incarnation cannot be separated from the Crucifixion. The baby Jesus was born under the shadow of the cross. He not only came to teach, heal and perform wonders, but also to suffer, die, rise again, and ascend to the Father. The incarnation is the bridge from death into life. This is cause for celebration!

But the Advent season is also a time of anticipation. The Old Testament prophets, with eager anticipation, foretold the coming of the Messiah. In the New Testament their visions and signs were confirmed in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Advent is a time of longing and hope as we prepare our hearts for the Second Coming of our Lord.

As we stand between the ages, between the First and the Second Advent of our Lord, this season should also be a time of self-examination. We are called

to reflect upon our relationship with the Lord and his mighty and merciful presence in our lives. It is a time to prepare ourselves for his glorious return to judge the living and the dead.

Hope, Peace, Joy, Love

The Advent season is filled with meaningful symbolism. We will be celebrating each week by the lighting of the Advent wreath. For each of the four weeks there will be four corresponding candles on the wreath. Each candle represents a biblical theme. This Advent season will follow the themes of **hope, peace, joy, and love**. In the center of the wreath will be a fifth candle, the Christ candle, which we will light on Christmas Eve to mark the Messiah's arrival. Christ came that we might experience these wonderful benefits of the cross. Yet we wait in eager anticipation for the full realization of the hope, peace, joy and love that he offers. Therefore let us not only say *Merry Christmas*, but may we cry, *Maranatha, Lord come quickly!*

Our Plan

This year, we will be looking at four succinct statements the New Testament writers make about the messiah who was born in Bethlehem, asking how these statements lead us to hope, peace, joy and love.

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. 1 Timothy 2:15

We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens...
Hebrews 4:14

And you shall call his name Jesus. Luke 1:31

God sent his only Son into the world. 1 John 4:9

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Hope!

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners



Week One: 1 Timothy 1:12-17

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners

1 Timothy 2:15

Depending on your worldview, hope is either an indispensable pillar of life or a great tease. For instance, theologian Emil Brunner once remarked, *What oxygen is to the lungs, such is hope to the meaning of life.* On the other hand, atheist thinker Friedrich Nietzsche suggested, *Hope is the worst of evils, for it prolongs the torment of man.*

The Apostle Paul would likely have contended that your position on hope depends largely upon the object of your hope. In this thankful passage from his letter to Timothy, Paul considers the great hope of the Christian faith and marvels at the mercy of God extended to sinners.

Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17, making a note of anything that stands out to you.

1:12 Paul begins with the title, *Christ Jesus our Lord*. What does the lordship of Christ mean to you? What are some areas of your life in which you find the rule of Jesus difficult?

1:13 How does Paul describe himself in verse 13?

In the book of Acts, we read of a young believer named Stephen who boldly confessed Christ before the vengeful Sanhedrin. Read Acts 7:54–8:3. How does this story illustrate what Paul (previously known as Saul) claims in 1 Timothy 1:13?

From our way of thinking, Saul would make an unlikely candidate to become a prominent ambassador of Jesus Christ. But, from God's perspective, Saul's past résumé mattered little. John Stott comments on this passage, *Humanly speaking, there was no hope for someone as malicious and aggressive as he was. But he was not beyond the mercy of God.*¹

¹ John R.W. Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, 1996, p. 51.

Think about your own life from the world's perspective. What are some of the things in your life—either past or present—that would make you an unlikely candidate to be God's child?

1:13-14 How did God respond to Paul, the blaspheming and violent persecutor of the church? What does this reveal to you about God's character?

1:15 This is the climax of the passage and the heart of the gospel; Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. When did this truth first find full acceptance in your life? What difference has this made in your life?

Advent reminds us that we cannot separate Christmas and Easter. The hope of Christmas is the crucified Christ. The One that the angels heralded would be the One that the disciples abandoned. The One that the shepherds adored would be the One that the crowds reviled. The baby in the manger would become the man upon the cross. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

How does Christ's mission to save sinners answer humanity's need for hope?

1:16 Here, Paul reflects on why he was shown mercy despite his shameful past. What was God's motivation in extending mercy to Paul? How have you experienced the patience of God in your life?

1:17 After considering all that God has done for a rebel such as him, Paul concludes with a beautiful statement of praise and gratitude that sheds light on the ultimate goal and purpose of salvation. How does salvation of sinners result in honor and glory for God?

How does the story of Paul's salvation strengthen your hope? How does it embolden your prayers? How does it inform your view of those who have yet to accept salvation?

Take some time to write your own expression of praise to our great God. Reflect on your own sinfulness and thank him for the mercy and grace he has extended to you.

Peace!

We have a great high priest...



Week Two: Hebrews 4:1-16

...We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens...

Hebrews 4:14

The second Advent candle is the candle of Peace. We might take it for granted that we are at peace with God. Henry David Thoreau, for example, was asked at the end of his life if he was at peace with God and he responded, *I didn't know we had a quarrel.*

In fact, every man and woman and child has a quarrel with God. Our sins have separated us from a holy God. The sinful mind is hostile toward God and God is deeply provoked by our sin and rebellion. The Scriptures are embarrassingly clear. Left to ourselves, we are not at peace with God!

Think about the story of humanity in the Bible.

Genesis, the book of beginnings, tells us where we came from: God made us and all things. It tells us how everything was made: God spoke and it was... The sinless condition in the pristine garden with uninhibited access to God's presence is soon lost. Adam and Eve are banished from the garden. They are judged, with promises of mercy folded into the judgment. Mankind becomes increasingly wicked, until God de-creates the world with a flood (just as the waters were separated that the dry land might appear, so now the dry land has been overwhelmed by the waters)...¹

It is no wonder, therefore, that Paul says the sinful mind is hostile toward God (Romans 8:7) and that we, in our natural state, are objects of God's wrath (Ephesians 2:3).

Peace With God!

The writer of Hebrews makes a profound statement about Jesus. *He is our great high priest who has passed through the heavens... the Son of God.* This is the best news in the universe!

As you approach Hebrews chapter 4 keep the following in mind:

The book we call Hebrews was originally a sermon written to Jewish believers who seem to be losing their confidence in Jesus as their messiah. Probably because of outside persecution, they are tempted to leave their embrace of Jesus and revert back to Judaism without Christ. Accordingly, the writer makes an effort to show that Jesus is the one they had been waiting for through the centuries.

By quoting the Old Testament, the preacher / writer of Hebrews 4 shows the people of God almost getting into the peace (the rest) of God, but not quite.

¹ James Hamilton Jr., *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Kindle Locations 1406-1415).

4:2, for example, looks back to the event at Kadesh-Barnea (Numbers 14) when the people were poised to enter the promised land after their captivity in Egypt. But they didn't believe in the promise of God and chose not to enter the land. Instead they covered in unbelief and forfeited God's promise. So God swore in his wrath, *They shall not enter my rest...* We might paraphrase this verse, *They shall never enter my peace*. God was offering them peace in the land if the people walked by faith. Their unbelief, expressed in their unwillingness to take the land, sent them into the desert for another 40 years. This becomes a metaphor in the Bible for our hostile relation with God.

Again, in Hebrews chapter 4, the writer is contrasting the lack of peace in this history of God's people with the new-found peace available in Jesus Christ.

Read and discuss Hebrews 4. Help one another with the details. Employ a study Bible if you have one. What is the writer saying in Hebrews 4:1-13?

Now concentrate on Hebrew 4:14-16. Read these verses from as many translations as you have available. Meditate upon these verses.

What does the *since then* (*therefore* in the NIV) of verse 14 refer to?

You should be able to find four assertions about Jesus as our *great high priest* in these verses. What are they?

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

In Jewish worship the high priest would enter the holy of holies (the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle or temple) once each year. To get there he would offer a sacrifice for his own sins. Once inside the most holy place the priest would sprinkle blood on the *mercy-seat*, the lid on a box called the *ark*. There he stood, for a moment, in the presence of God to offer a sacrifice for the people's sins. Then he left as quickly as possible. It was a terrifying experience to be in the presence of the holy God.

Notice the contrast in 4:14. Unlike an earthly high priest, Jesus is the great high priest who has passed through the heavens! He is always in the presence of God (Heb. 9:24)!

The title *great high priest* is wonderfully redundant. In the Hebrew Bible the title *high priest* is literally *great priest*. To call Jesus our *great high priest* is to say the equivalent of *great great priest*.

What are we, the readers, to do with this marvelous truth? See 4:14b.

In Scripture, peace is a favorite greeting found at the beginning and end of many New Testament letters. *Peace* (*shalom* in Hebrew; *eirene* in Greek) in the simplest, biblical sense can be considered *completeness, wholeness, and soundness*. It is not only expressed by cessation from war but also in friendship between two people (Genesis 26:29; Psalm 28:3), and intimate relationship with God (Numbers 25:12; Isaiah 54:10). The very purpose of Christ coming into the world was to bring *peace* with God through redemption and reconciliation. As Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans,

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand . . .

Romans 5:1-2a

Take a moment and reflect upon what Christ has done in your life. Has knowing God through Christ brought *peace* to your life? How have you experienced this *peace*? Share this with your homegroup.

Because we have *peace* with God we are to be at peace with one another in the Church. One of the most striking verses in the New Testament is Ephesians 2:14. Paul is writing to a church that is rife with racial tension between Jews and Gentiles. After one of the most succinct passages describing our salvation in the whole New Testament (Ephesians 2:1-10), Paul goes on to point out that not only do we have peace with God because of Jesus, we have peace with one another. *For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility. . . .*

How have you, or should you, experience this *peace* in the Body of Christ?
What does the second week of Advent say to our troubled relations?

Notice where Hebrews 4:14 leads. Read and celebrate the truth of 10:19-25.
This is, arguably, the climax of the book of Hebrews.

Notice the repetition of the words *let us*. Let us *draw near...*, let us *hold fast...*, and let us *consider*.

Fill in the blanks here. Draw near to what, hold fast to what, consider what?

How would our peace with God prompt these three responses?

Joy!

And you shall call his name Jesus



Week Three: Luke 1:26-38

And you shall call his name Jesus.

Luke 1:31

The third candle to be lit on the Advent wreath is pink or rose-colored and symbolizes *joy* at the coming of Christ. Indeed, we have many reasons to be joyful. Every good and perfect gift comes from the gracious hand of the Father and brings great *joy* to our lives. Yet all of the joys of life are like fireflies compared to the light of the sun. The true *joy* giver is our Lord Jesus Christ.

Luke 1-2 gives us the most detailed account of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. In these two chapters we find 132 verses telling this story! Woven into this narrative is the theme of *joy*. We learn that,

- The birth of John the Baptist will produce *joy and gladness* (1:14).
- John leaps for *joy* in his mother's womb (1:44).

- When John is born the neighbors *rejoice* (1:58).
- Mary *rejoices* in God her savior (1:47).
- The shepherds receive news that will be a great *joy* that will be for all the people (2:10).

Before going on in this Advent study, read Luke 1:26-38, if time allows read all of Luke 1 and 2. This is the classic *Christmas* story in the Bible. Write down a few words that describe what Mary must have been feeling as this dialogue in 1:26-38 took place.

What statements are there in these short paragraphs that give rise to joy?

1:31 Here the angel Gabriel tells Mary to name her son *Jesus*. The name means *Yahweh* saves. At long last, the savior of the world has arrived. Notice the following statements Gabriel makes about this *Jesus*. Talk with your homegroup how they would give rise to joy.

He will be great

He will be called the Son of the Most High

He will reign on David's throne

He will reign over the house of Jacob forever

His kingdom will never end

A more difficult question: How do the above statements give you joy?

Two times in this paragraph Mary is referred to as favored or as having found *favor* with God (1:28 and 1:30). The Greek word is a mouth full, *kexaritomené*. This long word is built on the Greek word for grace. We know from Mary's response to Gabriel's message that she was filled with joy (see 1:46-47). Why is joy the inevitable outgrowth of grace?

If you love Jesus, that is because he first loved you. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul details the blessings we have because of Jesus. He points out to the church that believers have been *blessed* in Christ, *chosen* in Christ, made *holy and blameless* in Christ, *predestined* by the Father to be in Christ, etc. (see Ephesians 1:3-14). Then Paul erupts in praise saying, to the *praise of his glorious grace!* (Ephesians 1:6). There it is again, grace produces joy and gratitude.

Explain to your homegroup your experience of the joy that comes from being favored by God.

Respond to the following quotation by Ben Patterson.

Gratitude and joy are the twin children of grace, organically joined both theologically and spiritually. In Greek they are even related linguistically: the words for grace, gratitude and joy all have the same root, *char*, a noun that refers to health and well-being. "Grace" is *charis*, "gratitude" is *eucharistia*, and "joy" is *chara*.

What is merely a linguistic relationship in Greek is a burning reality in the kingdom of God. Grace is God's mercy, his unmerited favor. It is what Frederick Buechner calls the "crucial eccentricity" of Christian faith, the unique and wonderfully odd thing God does to forgive sinners: he doesn't give them the bad things they deserve but the incredibly good things they don't deserve.¹

Explain this *burning reality* in your life.

Is it possible to be a joyless Christian? What should our response be when we find ourselves without joy in our lives?

¹ From *He Has Made Me Glad*, 2005, pp. 16-17.

The *Christmas season* is a difficult season for many. In fact, Christmas for some is the most *joyless* time of the year. We hear people say, *...the holidays are a hard time for me, I'll be glad when they are behind us.* What can you do during this Advent season to find joy in God and his grace? How could Gabriel's announcement to Mary give you joy during this season?

Examine the following passages from the Bible. How could these passages increase our joy?

- John 15:9-14
- Galatians 5:22-26
- Jeremiah 15:16
- Psalm 119:14-16

One of the greatest statements in the New Testament about joy is found in Peter's first letter. Read and meditate upon this bold claim. Notice how much we are like Mary when she expresses her joy. She had not seen Jesus but she believed and rejoiced. We haven't seen Jesus but we believe in him. Joy is the outgrowth of belief.

Spend time meditating on these verses alone and as a homegroup. Rejoice.
The savior is born!

Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

1 Peter 1:8-9

Love!

God sent his only Son into the world



Week Four: 1 John 4:7-12

God sent his only Son into the world

1 John 4:9

As a culture, we think much about *love*. The theme of love dominates the best-seller lists, the sitcoms, and the covers of the magazines dotting the grocery store checkout lines. But love is celebrated on the radio unlike anyplace else. Write down the first song title with the word “love” that comes to mind for each of the genres of music listed below.

- Hard Rock –
- Country –
- R&B –
- Standards –
- Showtunes –
- Pop –

In the letter of 1 John, the Apostle has much to say on the topic as well. Read 1 John 4:7-12 and make a note of anything that stands out to you.

Quite obviously, love is John's chief concern in this section of the letter. Some form of the word *love* comes up 15 times in the space of just six verses! John doesn't have in mind the amorphous, shifting, passionate outbursts so often memorialized in the songs on the radio. Rather, he has in view a steady, powerful, and trustworthy trait emanating from the character of God.

4:7 John calls believers to love one another based on the source of love. What does John mean when he says, *love is from God*?

4:8 If God is the source of love, then a lack of love reveals a lack of God. When he uses the phrase, *know God*, what does John have in mind? Mental awareness of God; intellectual assent to the reality of God; relational familiarity with God; or something else?

Throughout his letters and his gospel, John demonstrates a concern for wedding right confession with right conduct. For John, the action of love reveals that one has been *born of God and knows God*. In short, *knowing God* is demonstrated through one's life. Respond to the following quote from Alexander Ross...

Orthodoxy in belief is not enough. Unless orthodoxy be inspired and warmed by love it can sometimes be a very unlovely and a very unattractive thing. John has already written of brotherly love as a sign and evidence of our walking in the light and walking as Christ walked (2:7-11)...If those who know that "God is light" (1:5) are under obligation to walk in the light, those who know that "God is love" are under obligation to walk in love. It is only the man who loves who can claim to be a child of God.¹

In what ways would you like to see your conduct better match your confession?

John claims that love flows from the character of God and that his people, in a unique way, know what love is, and that, furthermore, those who do not love cannot claim to know God. How, then, are we to understand the loving but unregenerate people with whom we come into contact throughout our daily lives? How would John respond to them?

¹ Alexander Ross, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 1964, p. 201.

4:9-10 In these verses, John celebrates the pinnacle of God's love: his redemption of sinners through the provision of his Son as an atoning sacrifice for sin. Although we might be tempted to think of the death of Christ as an act primarily reflective of God's justice, John links the crucifixion to God's love. How does the substitutionary death of Jesus demonstrate God's love?

4:10 John contends that God acted in love to provide the sacrifice of Christ even when we did not love God. What feeling does this create in you?

4:11 The practical implication of being shown such love by God is that we are to be a people who love others. In fact, in John 13:34-35, Jesus names love as the distinguishing criteria by which the world will be able to determine those who are his followers. Think of the parable of the unmerciful servant. (See Matthew 18:21-35 for a refresher.) The one who had been forgiven was expected to forgive. Likewise, we who have been shown great and unmerited love are expected to show love to others.

How is the love of God shown to the world through SBCC? What is one way in which the love of God is being demonstrated through your life? What is one way in which you would like to grow in love?

Traditionally, the Christian church has lit the love candle last, making it the final consideration of the Advent season. Why do you think this is? How does Christmas express God's love?

Take some time to pray. Thank God for loving you even when you didn't love him. Pray that God's love would continue to shape and transform your life. Pray that, as you consider the cost of God's love, you will increasingly lead a life of love. Pray for those in your life who have not yet submitted to the love of God.

Advent Family Resources

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 5th 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!