

“God With Us: Hope”

Isaiah 9:2-7 • 1 Peter 1:3-16

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 2, 2018

For as long as I can remember, people have been complaining that Christmas is getting too commercialized. In fact, that very thought was included in the Charlie Brown Christmas special which was produced 53 years ago. But these days I am beginning to think we've lost Christmas all together. Everyone seems to be in a hurry for Christmas – in a hurry for it to start and a in a hurry for it to be over. We were in one of the large home-improvement stores in town on Friday. That was still November. They had their Christmas merchandise on clearance!

That evening one of our local news broadcasts had a segment on how to keep your Christmas tree fresh during this year's extra long Christmas season. The reporter was completely unaware that there is no extra-long Christmas season. It's still 12 days long. Perhaps you've heard a song about the 12 Days of Christmas. The Christmas season begins on December 25 and lasts until January 5 where it's followed on the 6th by Epiphany, which is when the church traditionally celebrates the coming of the Wise Men. The irony in our society today is that by the time Christmas begins it will be over. By December 25th many people are just plain tired of Christmas. Maybe this year more than ever what we need is Advent.

Advent is the season of *preparation* for Christmas. It's a time of waiting. The word Advent comes from Latin and means “coming” or “arrival.” Advent is a time for us to prepare to celebrate God coming by remembering the longing of the Jews for the Messiah for hundreds of years. It's a time to prepare by reflecting on what it means that God came here as the baby Jesus, fulfilling ALL the prophecies about him. God came to *us*. Immanuel: God With Us. But Advent's also a time to reflect on Jesus returning one day as judge and king. Like the ancient Jewish people, we long for the time

when Jesus comes and makes everything right again.

When God stepped into our world 2,000 years ago it was a very counter-cultural event. He didn't show up the way anyone expected. Instead he showed up as a helpless baby born in a stable in a remote, oppressed corner of the world. When we think about celebrating Advent and Christmas, perhaps we need to be counter-cultural as well.

The four Sundays in Advent are intended to focus our attention on the difference that “God With Us” makes in our lives, our church, and our world. Each Sunday focuses on one of those things that we have because of Jesus' birth: hope, love, joy, and peace. It seems to me that each of those is in short supply these days and all of us could use more of each.

I didn't know until last week that the use of the Advent wreath, with its five candles, was begun by Martin Luther. He was always looking for ways that people could teach the faith to their children and he thought that the candles and the readings would help people to learn about the birth of Jesus. Today is the first Sunday of Advent. A few minutes ago we lit the first candle in our Advent wreath, the candle representing hope.

Today in our country there is an epidemic of hopelessness. The suicide rate last year was the highest in over 50 years. Drug overdose deaths is at an all-time high. What is driving this epidemic of drug overdoses and suicide? Dr. William Dietz, a disease prevention expert at George Washington University said, “I really do believe that people are increasingly hopeless, and that that leads to drug use, it leads potentially to suicide.”

I think one of the biggest contributing factors to this sense of hopelessness is loneliness. Health Insurer CIGNA recently conducted a nationwide survey of 20,000 adults. What they discovered is that roughly

half of them reported significant loneliness. 54% said they always or sometimes feel that no one knows them well and 40% said they lack companionship and don't have meaningful relationships. And the problem is getting worse. The younger adults reported higher levels of loneliness than older adults. I think a big reason for this is social media, which was supposed to bring people together but it's done just the opposite.

I think this is where the Church comes in with the practice of Advent. Advent is the Season of Hope – the hope that comes from God with us. The source of our hope is that God comes. He comes to be with us. He comes to reconcile us with himself. As our reading from 1 Peter puts it, “he has caused us to be born again to a living hope.” We have hope because God has acted.

Sometimes we confuse hope with wishing. But they're not the same. I might say, “I hope I win the lottery.” That's not a hope it's a wish. Hope is based on a reasonable expectation that the thing we hope for will take place. Our living hope comes with a very reasonable expectation. It's based on God's promises and is proven by God's actions. Peter says, “he has caused us to be born again to a living hope *through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who *by God's power* are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”

Friends, you and I can be confident in the hope of salvation because God has proved it by the Resurrection of Jesus. Peter goes on to point out that we have an advantage that the Old

Testament prophets didn't have. And this relates to Advent because there's a third coming of Jesus that we celebrate. Jesus comes to us through the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit. Peter says that now you can have confidence in this hope that the prophets didn't have. You have the good news and are able to know the truth.

Now it's one thing to hope on a merely intellectual level. But that's now what God calls us to do. We need our hope to move us to action. Verse 8 says, “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.” That's a description of real hope, a hope that brings so much joy that it can't even be expressed. It bubbles up from inside of you. The result is that you want to be holy in all your conduct.

Finally, verse 13 tells us to prepare our minds for action. What kind of action? Countercultural action. Here's my challenge to each of you today. For the next few weeks, celebrate Advent. Don't get caught up in the race to Christmas. Spend some time every day thinking about what it means to have God with us. And here's how I suggest you do it. It turns out that the Gospel of Luke has 24 chapters. From now until Christmas, read one chapter a day. That's about 10 minutes a day. If you do that you will wake up on Christmas morning *knowing* why we celebrate Christmas.

Amen.