

Advent For 2018

So That's What Advent's About!

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. I grew up in the Assemblies of God and it will come as no surprise to most of you that Advent was never talked about or heard of. Over the last couple of years, I've seen some things posted on social media that questioned why Pentecostals would celebrate Advent or Lent. That was something the churches with stained glass and candles talked about, but not us. So I want to share this morning my reasons why we have chosen to celebrate Advent, to explain what Advent is and why I think it's important for us as Assembly of God believers. I preached this a few years ago and even had an article printed in the Pentecostal Evangel explaining my position and my reasons for celebrating Advent.

The term advent is taken from a Latin word which means "coming" or "arrival." For instance, we talk about the "advent of the computer age". We are just talking about the coming of the computer age - the arrival of the computer age. In the church world then Advent refers to the anticipated arrival of Jesus as a baby born in Bethlehem, born to be our Savior.

In the church, the season of Advent refers specifically to the four Sundays before Christmas Day. We think of the Christmas season as beginning immediately after thanksgiving and lasting until January 1, but for much of the church's history the Christmas Season began Christmas Eve and lasted until January 6. January 6th is celebrated in the church as Epiphany. The word epiphany means to reveal or to make known. Church tradition celebrates the Epiphany on January 6th as the day the wise men found Jesus and by their gifts they made known that he was the king of kings.

Between Christmas, December 25th and Epiphany, January 6th, are twelve days. Now you know where the phrase (and the song) the twelve days of Christmas came from. So you've got Advent – the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day. You've got the Christmas season – from December 25 (or December 24th evening) to January 6th, and you've got Epiphany on January 6th. Confused yet? Maybe that's why our churches never celebrated Advent, it got too confusing.

But let me suggest something to you. Let me share with you why I think this idea of Advent is becoming so important for me and why I think it should be important for our churches. As some of you know, when I became pastor in 1985, I began preaching an Advent series that year. Actually, I didn't really even know what Advent was or when it began, I just took the month of December to preach a series of messages on the incarnation and Jesus' birth. (Incarnation is a fancy word to refer to Jesus being born, God becoming flesh). I felt to only

focus on this incredible miracle one Sunday out of the year simply wasn't enough for me. But over these past years, as the whole American Christmas season has become more and more about commerce and a secular holiday and less about the birth of Christ, I think it has become even more important for the church to celebrate Advent.

In my mind Christmas has become the holiday we all enjoy and I'm okay with celebrating "Christmas." I like all the songs about the season. I'm happy to sing about Santa and Rudolph and baby it's cold outside. I love to dream about a white Christmas and all the rest. Give me a tree and some ornaments and dozens of snow men like Paula has and I'm happy. Let's have a parade and we can call it a Christmas parade or a holiday parade or a winter festival and then we won't have to get mad about its' name because it's just a celebration of a secular season and holiday. We aren't trying to keep Christ in Christmas because Christmas isn't about Jesus anymore, it's about Santa and WalMart and big screen tvs. Every year we see pictures of people fighting to get ahead of each other to get the bargains at Walmart on black Friday. Yep, that's the spirit of Christmas in America, isn't it? And those folks who are screaming and clawing their way through the crowds, shoving people out of the way, jerking bargains out of the arms of others, some of them are the same people who will scream the loudest about how we need to keep Christ in Christmas. I'm just not sure we can find Christ in the current American experience we call Christmas. In fact, I wouldn't even look for him there.

Advent however, well that's a whole different thing. Advent doesn't need a parade because it is an entirely spiritual thing that the world and the markets aren't able to touch. Advent is my anticipation of the birth of Christ. It allows me to enter into the biblical story of His birth. Advent is the time to focus on this greatest of miracles, that God became flesh, that he took upon himself our nature in order to take upon himself our sins so that by faith we could partake of his nature and his righteousness. I'm not a very good soldier in the culture war I guess but in my head I've rescued Jesus from a holiday that doesn't have much to do with him anymore and I'm trying to find a new way to honor him and what he has done for me. That's why I'm a fan of Advent. I want to help us stay focused on what is truly important at this season. So go ahead and celebrate Christmas and the holidays, but then let's observe Advent and the holy days. Maybe we didn't do a very good job of keeping Christ in Christmas but let's see if we can at least keep Christ in Advent.

With that said, you're thinking, "now tell me again, what's the point of Advent? What's it all about?" Think of silence. Think of the 400 years of silence between the Old and New

Testament. Is God finished with Israel? Has he stopped talking? Have all the signs and wonders come to an end? It sure looks that way. Is there a sign that things are about to change? The prophet Isaiah had mentioned a sign. **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.”**

Isaiah 7:14 Advent anticipates the breaking of the silence with that extraordinary message – “unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord.” Salvation will come to you and Advent anticipates the arrival of that extraordinary sign and that extraordinary salvation.

Advent is about anticipation and expectation. During Advent, Jesus hasn't been born yet. Heaven's preparations aren't yet complete. It's not the fullness of time, not just yet. During these four Sundays, Mary and Joseph haven't made it to Bethlehem yet. The manger is still empty, but not for long. We can see Mary and Joseph on the road from Nazareth. Their pace is steady but slow as the roads are getting crowded with folks heading to Bethlehem because of that no good Roman Caesar and his taxes. “Census my eye. All they want is my money!”

Advent is about anticipation. Is it time? Not yet, but almost. It's almost time for the silence of 400 years to be broken. God is about to speak to Israel and to the whole world again and this time his silence will be broken by the cries of a newborn baby. Something extraordinary is about to happen. Can you feel it? Can you sense it? God the Savior is about to be born to us, Christ the Lord, and this will be the sign to us - a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. This is what Advent is all about. Anticipation. So you can have your black Friday sales and your egg nog and frosty the snowman, but give me a quiet moment to ponder the fullness of time that approaches. After all these years of silence, without a word or a sign from God, the heavens are about to open, the angels are about to sing, a baby is about to be born. Arrival. He's coming. That's Advent – preparing our hearts for the arrival of the new born King!

Advent is born out of a certainty, a faith that God will speak. He will intervene once again, when the time is exactly right. That's good news for us, for some of us are experiencing the pain that comes with anticipation. For us as children, waiting for Christmas to get here was the worst! It was so slow arriving. Some of us are still waiting for something more important than packages and toys. We're waiting for God to break his silence in our personal life. It's been too long. We've been waiting, anticipating his intervention, his healing, his words, his signs, but nothing has happened. Don't give up. Advent reminds us to keep watching and waiting expectantly. See Mary and Joseph on the road? Advent is the season for marking their

progress. Just as surely as you see them and you know that Jesus will be born, your miracle, your sign, your answer is on the way. God will speak. He will answer. He will intervene. He will arrive, on time, at just the right time. That's the importance of Advent. Every time you see a manger scene, let it remind you - Jesus is coming. He's coming to me in my life and He will be right on time

Advent is about hope. Hope that the way things are today – that's not the way they'll be tomorrow. The prophet said, **“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” Isaiah 9:2.** You know what it's like to walk in darkness? Everything is uncertain. You lack the confidence to take a bold step because you can't see what's ahead. There are monsters lurking everywhere you turn, hiding in the shadows. At least that's how it looks when you're walking in the dark. Everything is frightening and sinister and unknown. But Advent is about hope. It's the promise of light invading our darkness. Things are about to change. Darkness will be shattered. Notice the prophetic past tense. Isaiah said it like it had already happened – “the people walking in darkness have seen...” He could speak of it in the past tense even though it wouldn't happen for hundreds of years because it was just that certain. God had promised. God had spoken and it would happen because God is faithful. He cannot lie.

Look with me at Isaiah 9. We read verse 2, but look at verse 1. **“Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.” Isaiah 9:1** I like the hopefulness of Advent! No more gloom for us who have experienced darkness and distress. For those of us who know what it feels like to bear the heavy burdens, to not be able to lift our heads because of the gloom, look at the promise of verse 4. **“For as in the day of Midian's defeat (Israel's arch-enemy), you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.” Isaiah 9:4**

Israel knew about battle and about being oppressed. And the people of Israel in Jesus' day were experiencing this oppression by the Romans. They experienced first hand, every day, the yoke that burdened them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor on their backs, the heavy boot of the Roman soldier on their necks. They were living in hope of the coming of Messiah, the Savior that would set them free from that oppression. They were expecting a political savior, but God had something entirely different, something entirely greater for them and for us. The prophet said, **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given and the**

government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.” Isaiah 9:6-7

Advent is the anticipation of the one who will rule and reign forever. There will be no end to his kingdom and reign. But there is even more. The people expected a Savior who would liberate them from their oppressors, but the angel told Joseph that he and Mary were to call his name Jesus, which means Savior, because “he will save his people from their sins.”

He had come to save – not simply to save us from our oppressors but more importantly to save us from ourselves! He has come to save us from our sins, our sinfulness, from our own fallen and devilish nature. Advent fills us with hope as we realize He will come to save us from hell and from eternal separation from God. He will come as a savior and oh, what a Savior.

Advent is about anticipation and about hope. And **Advent is about reflection**. It is about us, taking the time to reflect on the ways of God, to reflect on the mysteries of God, on the faithfulness of God, on the love of God. **Advent is a reminder to trust!** Every time we find ourselves in darkness, wondering if there is a light at the end of the tunnel, we remember that those living in darkness have seen a great light. Jesus, the light of the world is coming and he will shine that light on us. It’s about remembering God’s faithfulness. That he always keeps his promise, he always honors his word.

What are you expecting? What are you anticipating? Are you anticipating his deliverance? His help? His intervention? Are you expecting his arrival in your life and your circumstances? Advent reminds us to keep expecting, to keep anticipating. In the fullness of time, he will come to us.

Advent is about preparation. It is about preparing our hearts for his arrival. If you are expecting a baby, you spend months preparing. You get the nursery ready, the walls painted, the furniture all fixed the way you want. There is a lot of preparation involved as you welcome that newborn into your home and your life. Advent is about that kind of preparation as we ready our hearts once again for his arrival.

Think of the time spent preparing for Christmas. Some of you never went to bed Thanksgiving night so you could be at the store when the doors opened Friday. Why? To save money and get your shopping done as you prepared for Christmas. You were preparing for the arrival of Christmas. Some of you spent days decorating the inside and outside of your house for Christmas. Preparing for the holidays, we say.

I'm suggesting you take time for some spiritual preparation. You spent hours shopping and decorating, how about spending a few minutes to read Luke or Matthew's account of the nativity, the birth of Christ? Spend a few moments each day meditating on what it means, that God sent his son into the world to save us. Prepare your heart for his arrival. And let me encourage you to make sure you are prepared for his next arrival as well.

Advent is another way of saying, "Get ready! Something important is about to happen!" Jesus said, **"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard. Be alert! You do not know when that time will come."** Mark 13:32-33

Are you ready? Are you ready for Advent? Are you ready for his coming? Something important is about to happen! Let's use this time, this Advent season, to ready our hearts for the miracle of his birth. Let's prepare our hearts to gaze with wonder at God in the flesh, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Prepare for the miracle of Immanuel, God with us. But let's also use this time to prepare our hearts for the miracle of his return. Mary didn't know the day or the hour of his arrival until the birth pains began. We don't know the day or the hour for the rapture, the catching away of his church, but friends, the birth pains have begun. The signs are all around us. It's time to prepare. Get ready. Jesus is coming!

I want to give you the opportunity to get ready for his arrival. Unlike the inn in Bethlehem, prepare a place for Jesus in your heart and life, in your schedule over the next four weeks. What must you do to ready yourself to receive Jesus? How about making time and preparing a place in your heart for Jesus? Make a home for him in your life today.

Maybe you've been waiting in silence for him to come, wondering where he is. The prophet said this is the sign, a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son. Here is the sign for you. Jesus is coming, to you, in this moment! You aren't alone anymore.