

Advent 2021 Part 1

What's It All About, Advent?

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Growing up in the Assemblies of God, we never talked about Advent. I never heard the word. Advent was something churches with stained glass windows and candles talked about, but not us. Ten years ago I preached a message about why I thought we should celebrate Advent. An abbreviated version of the sermon was published in the Pentecostal Evangel so I gather I'm not a heretic. I think the last time I shared specifically about why I choose to celebrate Advent was three years ago, in 2018. I just felt once again I needed to explain the meaning and reason for Advent, to help us get the most out of this season in the church calendar. We're going to spend a couple of Sundays on the importance of 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're talking about the arrival of the computer age. In the church then Advent refers to the coming or the arrival of Jesus as a baby born in Bethlehem, born to be our Savior.

As Christians 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 and still in the Eastern churches and many liturgical churches, the Christmas Season begins Christmas Eve and lasts until January 6. (The 12 days of Christmas). January 6th is celebrated in many churches as Epiphany. That word 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 he was the King of Kings. In those churches you won't hear carols sung or see Christmas decorations during Advent, those things are reserved for Christmas. Advent is a more solemn season of preparation and anticipation. It is a time for exercising spiritual disciplines. Just as we would clean the house in preparation for the arrival of a special guest, Advent is preparation time for our mind and spirit, a time for prayer and quiet reflection. Part of the tradition includes the Advent wreath and the lighting of candles. It's just another way for us to focus our hearts and minds on His coming, His birth. Each Sunday we light another candle, helping us mark the progression of time, anticipating his arrival, remaining focused on what it's really all about.

That's a quick look at Advent in the church, but let me share with you why I think Advent is important for me and why I think it should be important for our churches. 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). To only focus on this incredible miracle one Sunday out of the year simply wasn't enough for me. Over the years, as the 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.

Christmas has become a holiday, all about Santa and presents under the tree. It's nostalgia and memories of simpler times and families gathered. It's also crass commercialism, fighting and scrambling to get the best deal on toys and electronics and the latest "I've got to have that" item, making happy children and retailers everywhere. It's stress and frustration with a pinch of peace and goodwill.

Advent is a whole different thing. Advent is something the world and the marketplace can't touch. Not a holiday, it's a holy season, anticipating the birth of Christ. 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. Dr. Chris Green, a Pentecostal theologian states, **Advent is "a season of waiting on God in ways that open us more and more completely to the fullness of God, a time to learn to wait as God waits."** ...Chris Green That's why I'm a fan of Advent. I want us to stay focused on what is truly important at this season. Celebrate Christmas and the holidays, but let's observe Advent and the holy days. Let's learn to wait on God, with God, to become more open to the fullness of God. With that said, you're thinking, "now tell me again, what's the point of Advent? What is it all about?" That's what we are going to consider for the next couple of Sundays. Consider a couple of things with me this morning.

Advent stands in opposition to a culture with misplaced values. In America at least, too much of our life is focused on what we have, our possessions, on getting rather than giving. "But Christmas is about giving" you argue. I agree, but the anticipation of Christmas is "I'm going to get presents!" Billions of dollars were spent Friday. People fight to get the last item on the shelf because possessions, having the right gift to give and to get is all important. Advent stands in opposition to a commercially driven culture. John writes, **"Do not love the world or anything in the world...for everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of**

his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world.” 1 John 2:15-16 Advent reminds us it’s not about things or possessions, it’s not about what we have, it’s about who has us! It’s about Jesus, about the birth of our Savior and Lord. What really matters is knowing him, loving him, living for him. John adds **“The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.” 1 John 2:17** Things, the presents you’ll get for Christmas, they’ll all pass away, but knowing Jesus, obeying him, the gift of God’s grace at work in your life, that lasts forever! That’s what we are to value. Advent helps us order our priorities, to value what is of eternal importance. Consider...

Only the hungry can celebrate Advent. It’s those who recognize our neediness and his completeness that can truly celebrate Advent. We recognize in Advent that we are broken, sinners and Jesus the Savior is coming, the only one who can save us and give us life and hope and peace. Many of you will recognize the name of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologian, pastor, author, he was imprisoned and executed by the Nazis in 1945. Bonhoeffer wrote, **“Advent can be celebrated only by those whose souls give them no peace, who know that they are poor and incomplete, and who sense something of the greatness that is supposed to come, before which they can only bow in humble timidity, waiting until he inclines himself toward us – the Holy One himself, God in the child in the manger. God is coming; the Lord Jesus is coming; Christmas is coming. Rejoice, O Christendom!” ...Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

It’s the hungry and needy that celebrate Advent. It’s those who have dwelt in great darkness that realize by faith the Light is coming. Advent puts us in company with Simeon and Anna in the gospel of Luke, two people who were waiting in hope. The bible says of Simeon, **“He was waiting for the consolation of Israel...It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.”** Simeon was hungry, waiting daily in the temple looking for the Messiah. He was living in Advent, anticipating Jesus’ arrival. When Joseph and Mary brought the baby into the temple, Simeon took the infant Jesus in his arms and said, **“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Luke 2:29-32.** Simeon was hungry to see Jesus, to behold the glory of God’s promise. That’s what Advent is about. The waiting of Advent helps increase our hunger for Jesus and his arrival.

Anna too lived in that season of Advent, anticipating and expecting the arrival of the

Messiah. The bible says she was a prophetess and was very old. **“She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.”** She lived in that constant hunger to see God’s glory. She longed to see the promise of redemption fulfilled and when she saw the infant Jesus with Mary and Joseph, the bible says **“She gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.” Luke 2:38**

It’s the hungry who celebrate Advent. We know something good is coming. You arrived at Thanksgiving dinner hungry because you were anticipating a good meal. Are you hungry for Jesus and what he brings? Jesus said, **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” Matthew 5:6** In Advent we join with Anna and Simeon, hungry for redemption, hungry for Jesus, recognizing our poverty and knowing what we need is found only in him. We live in anticipation of his coming knowing that all that hunger for Jesus will be satisfied.

Advent gives us time to clear our vision. Advent is a season for clearing away anything that clouds or distorts our spiritual vision. We often see only the physical, the temporal, failing to see the eternal. Advent gives us opportunity to deepen our discernment so we can recognize Christ born and present in our life, in our circumstances. We see darkness and difficulty everywhere in 2021 and we are prone to despair. It looks hopeless. There are no easy answers, no solutions. Wickedness seems to be winning. During Advent we clear our vision as we focus on God’s promises. Look again with eyes of faith and hope. Remember what this season is all about, the fulfillment of his promise, Jesus is coming. It’s not hopeless. Look again at all things in the light of Christ, in the hope of Christ.

I quoted earlier from Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was in prison in December of 1943 when he wrote these words to his fiancé, Maria von Wedemeyer. “Be brave for my sake, dearest Maria, even if this letter is your only token of my love this Christmas-tide. We shall both experience a few dark hours - why should we disguise that from each other? We shall ponder the incomprehensibility of our lot and be assailed by the question of why, over and above the darkness already enshrouding humanity, we should be subjected to the bitter anguish of a separation whose purpose we fail to understand...and then, just when everything is bearing down on us to such an extent that we can scarcely withstand it, the Christmas message comes to tell us that all our ideas are wrong, and that what we take to be evil and dark is really good and light because it comes from God.” **“Our eyes are at fault, that is all. God is in the manger, wealth**

in poverty, light in darkness, succor in abandonment. No evil can befall us; whatever men may do to us, they cannot but serve the God who is secretly revealed as love and rules the world and our lives.” ...Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Look again at the circumstances that overwhelm you and with clearer vision see that Jesus is coming, Jesus has come, the Redeemer and Savior. Look again and see God at work in the darkness to reveal his light, at work in our weakness to reveal his strength, at work in our poverty to reveal his plenty. You may feel alone but look again. It's Advent and his name is Immanuel, God with us. There is hope after all. That's what Advent is about, pointing us to hold on to hope!

Advent points us to fulfillment. Advent prepares our hearts in anticipation of Isaiah's prophecies. **“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, God with us...For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government shall be upon his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.”** Advent causes us to remember our God is faithful to his promises. But it's not only those prophecies of the birth of Christ, his first Advent to which we look. Advent reminds us the same One who promised the coming of Immanuel is the One who promised a day when **“Every valley shall be raised up and every mountain and hill made low, the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind together will see it...a day is coming when he will bring justice to the nations...he will make the rivers flow on barren heights and turn the desert into pools of water...the nations will beat their swords into plowshares and will study war no more...the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together and a little child will lead them...they will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”**

That day is coming. As surely as Christmas is coming. We are certain about Christmas because we are living on this side of his birth, living on this side of his death and resurrection. But if we read the prophecies again, about a virgin giving birth to a son, if we read them from that side, before the Nativity, before the events of Bethlehem, then we are reading them from the Advent side. Anticipating, preparing, hoping, waiting. That's where we are today. Waiting for

the fulfillment of his promises, waiting for the fullness of time, for the baby to come to term, for all things to come to term. We are waiting for that moment when he comes again and makes all things new. Prepare yourself, Jesus is coming. Prepare yourself as Bonhoeffer said, **“Advent can be celebrated only by those...who know that they are poor and incomplete, and who sense something of the greatness that is supposed to come, before which they can only bow in humble timidity, waiting until he inclines himself toward us – the Holy One himself, God in the child in the manger. God is coming; the Lord Jesus is coming; Christmas is coming. Rejoice, O Christendom!” ...Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

It's not just Christmas that is coming. The Lord Jesus is coming. Let's prepare our hearts for his Advent. Let's prepare our hearts for his return. Are you ready? Are you hungry? Let's renew our dedication to the Lord and purpose in our hearts that this season will be about Him! This is what Advent is all about!