

A Weekly Advent Reading
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Introduction: What is Advent?

Have you ever had a nightmare that you overslept when you had someone very important coming to your home? The dream culminates with the person walking into your “uncleaned” house after it looks like a tornado touched down. Or, worse yet, has this situation ever taken place when you *weren't* dreaming!?

Being unprepared for someone's coming is not good; it makes the guest feel as if his or her visit isn't very important to us, even if it really is. And the embarrassment and angst the unprepared host feels is palpable.

I am reminded of one of Jesus' parables, found in Matthew 25:1-13. That parable says:

“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps. The bridegroom was a long time in coming, and they all became drowsy and fell asleep.

At midnight the cry rang out: ‘Here’s the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!’

Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.’

‘No,’ they replied, ‘there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.’

But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut.

Later the others also came. ‘Lord, Lord,’ they said, ‘open the door for us!’

But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I don’t know you.’

Therefore keep watch, because you do not know the day or the hour.”

This is a parable, a story with a point, not an analogy where the actions of each character line up with reality. The bridegroom shutting people out is not intended to teach us that God is harsh and does not give second chances. Rather, the point the parable is teaching is to be prepared. Don't dilly-dally and think that one day you'll get around to preparing. Don't put off bringing your life in line with who you were made to be until the last minute, so that you are caught off guard. Prepare now. Work on your heart now. Follow Jesus now. That is the point of the parable.

It's also the point of Advent. Advent, which literally means “coming”, is about preparing for the coming of Christ in two different ways. First, Advent helps us prepare for the Nativity, the event that changed the entire course of history—Jesus coming into the world. Of course this has already happened, so in what sense can we prepare for it? *We prepare for our celebration of it.* Just as it is a terrible thing when someone important shows up and we are unprepared, it is terrible for Christmas to show up and for us to be unprepared to truly celebrate it. In the same way a time called Lent is intended to help Christians prepare for the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter, Advent is intended to help Christians prepare for the celebration of Jesus' birth on Christmas. If the day rolls around and we are unprepared, we have missed a huge opportunity to truly understand just how deep our celebration and rejoicing ought to be on Christmas.

Second, Advent is intended to help us prepare for the second coming of Christ, when he returns to save and also to judge. Just as the virgins in the parable were unprepared for the coming of the Bridegroom, perhaps many of us are unprepared for Christ to come again. Advent reminds us that just as Jesus came once, he is coming again, a truth that ought to thrill our hearts! Just as through the Nativity the long wait of the people of God was over and they could finally see the face of the Messiah in the person of Jesus, so also through the second coming our wait will be over and we will see the face of Jesus! In this time of Advent we will consider how to prepare our hearts so we are not anxious at his arrival, but overjoyed!

One of the ways Christians throughout history have prepared for this first coming of Christ is through a sustained focus on the Old Testament, through a sort of reenactment of the long wait of the people of God for the coming of the Messiah. Christians remember during Advent that God's people waited in slavery and exile for hundreds of years for redemption, until Jesus brought a redemption none of them were looking for. During these next few weeks we will consider this long wait for the coming of Christ, and that will help us better be prepared to celebrate the wonder of his coming.

Advent is about preparing for the coming of Christ. Let's begin this Advent season with a prayer, asking God to help us prepare for his coming.

Father, help prepare our hearts. Let us not scurry around in these next few weeks trying to prepare all the details of this season, yet neglect to prepare our hearts for you. Please help us remember that Christmas is not an American holiday and is not about present or a guy in a red suit. Christmas is about you, and how you fulfilled the hopes and prayers of generations when you sent your Son into the world. Help us to feel that same longing for the Messiah they felt. Help us to feel the desperation for hope they felt. Help us to feel the emptiness they must have felt with no Savior, but only a prayer for his coming. Help us to focus on you during this Advent, so we are prepared not only to celebrate you on Christmas, but also to welcome you with open arms and joyful hearts at your second coming. Amen.

Week 1 – Hope

Psalm 89 is a beautiful representation of both the hope and the sorrow that run throughout the Old Testament. The psalmist is quoting God at the beginning of these verses when he writes:

“I have found David my servant; with my sacred oil I have anointed him. My hand will sustain him; surely my arm will strengthen him... I will maintain my love to him forever, and my covenant with him will never fail. I will establish his line forever, his throne as long as the heavens endure.” (Psalm 89:20-21, 28-29)

They are reminding themselves of the promises God made to never forsake his people, or David in particular. The passage goes on:

“If his sons forsake my law and do not follow my statutes, if they violate my decrees and fail to keep my commands, I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging; but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray my faithfulness... Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—and I will not lie to David—that his line will continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun.” (Psalm 89:30-33, 35-36)

If God’s people forsake and turn away from him, they will be punished. But God promises never to give up on them or take away his love from them. After these hopeful verses about how God is always faithful, we see how the people of God have already forsaken him and failed to follow God’s commands, and how they have already been disciplined as God warned:

“But you have rejected, you have spurned, you have been very angry with your anointed one. You have renounced the covenant with your servant and have defiled his crown in the dust. You have broken through all his walls and have reduced his strongholds to dust. All who pass by have plundered him; he has become the scorn of his neighbors... You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with a mantle of shame.” (Psalm 89: 38-41, 45)

This psalm was apparently written during the exile, after the Israelites had been attacked, conquered, and dragged away from their country to far away Babylon. They were now slaves living apart from the land God had given them. They had been disciplined for turning their backs on God, just as God had warned. In the midst of the pain of exile, they could not see how God had never lied to them. He still had not forsaken his word or his promise. In their pleading with God they state that God had defiled David’s crown in the dust by letting Israel be conquered, but that was far from true. *They were being punished, but God’s promise that David’s line and his throne would last forever was still very much in effect.* They just couldn’t see it. In the midst of their suffering and sorrow over what they’d lost, hope was difficult for them to see.

Have there been times of sorrow in your life where hope was difficult?

Have there been times when it seemed God did not stay true to his promises?

The psalm ends poignantly, with pleading questions:

“How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? ... O Lord, where is your former great love, which in your faithfulness you swore to David?” (Psalm 89:46, 49)

They felt abandoned. They felt hopeless. They questioned God, even accusing him of going back on his word. They were in pain, and in the midst of their confusion they could only reach for hope, but never actually fully grasp it.

Fast forward a little over 500 years. The Israelites were back in their land, having been released from captivity by the Babylonians. Things were not like they used to be and they had to rebuild Israel back up from ruins. Even though they were back home, they were under the thumb of a larger power, including the Greeks and the Romans. Now, Israel was firmly controlled by the Romans and there were still many Israelites who questioned what God was doing. When would he finally renew the Israelite monarchy and raise up a king from the line of David to overthrow those who ruled over them? When would God finally restore his name and the name of his people, and show the world how powerful he was?

There were many different answers to these questions among the Israelites, and many different ideas about what would inspire God to finally restore Israel. For example, the Pharisees believed that if all the Israelites could fully live holy lives and follow the law down to the smallest commandment, God would finally remember his promises, overthrow the Romans, and restore Israel to power. This was a popular and well-known theory we see in the New Testament, but it was just one or many theories. Many Israelites lived in the tension between hope and doubt.

This was the case for a woman named Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah. They were faithful Israelites, true to God and trying their best to please him. We are told about them in Luke 1:

“In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest name Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.” (Luke 1:5-7)

They hadn’t only experienced disappointment on a national level, but also on a personal one. Though they were faithful followers of God, they were unable to have children (which in their culture meant they didn’t have God’s blessing). Yet they held on to hope; they did not give up, but continued on doing the right things, trying to please God. Through a very cool set of circumstances, God chose the formerly barren Elizabeth to bear one of the most important prophets of God in history, John the Baptist—the one who would prepare the way for the Messiah himself. And when the baby was born, check out the song that came from Zechariah’s lips:

“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” (Luke 1:68-79)

Zechariah recognized that his hopes, and the hopes of all his people over the hundreds of years since the exile, were now being fulfilled. And it filled him with great joy! He was able to see this hope bursting through precisely because he had never given up on God or the hope he had in God. He and Elizabeth had kept on living for God, and had not given up in the face of sorrow or defeat. They still believed God would stay true to his promises. What overwhelming joy they must have felt when they realized he was going to use *them* to fulfill those promises!

In the midst of our sorrow and our greatest challenges, we, too, can remember that God's work is not done. He is not absent. He has not left the world to its own devices. God is at work. Always. And not one of his promises will fail; he will come through.

Jesus promised to come back again, and he will. He promised to make all things right, and he will. He promised to wipe every tear from our eyes. And he will. We can trust, we can believe, *we can have hope*.

What would hope look like for you this holiday season? In what area of your life do you sense God is still at work, in spite of disappointment and loss?

Week 2 – Peace

The Israelites in exile always looked backward when they thought of peace: backward to Eden, when all was right with the world, and backward to the reign of King David, when peace reigned in the land and Israel was powerful and ruled themselves. To Israelites, peace was about more than the absence of war. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, denoted equilibrium, wholeness, completeness, and health. It meant things were the way they were supposed to be. They saw this lived out in Eden because there was no sin, and no enemies – all was whole. And they saw it lived out during David’s reign because Israel was powerful, God’s people were respected, and the nation was prosperous. Both were pictures of peace, life the way it was supposed to be.

But Eden and all its perfection was dashed, and David’s reign and the power of Israel were destroyed, and the Israelites in exile could only long for peace again one day. Peace and the return of a strong king born of David’s line were, for them, inextricable. You couldn’t have one without the other. But God had other plans.

The Israelites longed for hundreds of years for the restoration of the monarchy, for a Messiah-King to come and free them from exile and slavery. Most people seemed to envision an Israelite of royal lineage being born, celebrated, and rising up to lead Israel to freedom and power.

Instead, God’s path to peace began with an unmarried woman becoming pregnant, which was unspeakably shameful in ancient times, and giving birth to her son in a barn. Jesus’ path to peace didn’t include military might but by teaching people to turn the other cheek when they are hit. God’s path to peace didn’t include Jesus overthrowing the Romans, but rather dying at their hands.

It’s no wonder many Israelites did not believe! They wanted power! They wanted revenge, or at least redemption! In the face of these desires they were supposed to believe that this Jesus had accomplished something for them when he *died* at the hands of their oppressors?!? They simply could not envision a new kind of peace that did not include political and military power.

But God was not interested in military peace. He was interested in true *shalom*: in human beings made whole and right and pure as God created them to be. This is the peace God desired, peace between himself and his people.

When we talk about peace today, we often have the same biases as these Israelites: we long for military peace, for the nations of the world to live without wars and strife. Perhaps we long for peace between races or religions or genders or those of varying socio-economic statuses. We just want everyone to get along and treat each other well. Or maybe we just don’t like conflict. Certainly God is concerned with all of this and he longs for humanity to live together in peace and for each of us to love and value our neighbors.

However, God’s primary and ultimate concern is for a deeper kind of peace, a deeper *shalom*. Humanity was marred when sin messed up what God created, and God has been on a mission since Adam and Eve to redeem humanity, to set things right, to make them whole again. This is God’s concern, for ultimate peace and wholeness for all of humanity. We see this clearly at the end of Zechariah’s prayer song that we looked at last week. He says,

“And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.”
(Luke 1:76-79)

You can see in these verses how Zechariah, overcome with the Spirit, sees clearly what God is doing. He has come to bring peace not to Israel as a nation but to his people as individuals. And through Jesus “his people” now includes everyone—all of humanity. Jesus came to complete God’s mission to bring peace to all humanity. How? Through showing them the path to salvation and forgiveness of all their sins. This is how their feet would be guided onto the “path of peace.” Not through overthrowing the Romans and finally being restored to power and prominence and not through somehow returning to Eden. All of us now have the opportunity for peace and wholeness through the forgiveness Jesus brings.

As we prepare for Christ’s coming, let us remember that we often long for the wrong kinds of peace. We long for band-aids when life-saving surgery is needed. Lord, give us eyes to see your deepest desire for humanity, true peace and a true relationship with you. Give us a passion to partner with you to bring that true peace to all who are open to receiving it.

Christ entered the world and brought a path to peace for all, but clearly peace in every sense has not been accomplished. Evil still thrives, and confusion abounds, and many are as far from peace and wholeness as they can be. Our world is still broken and mangled; *we* are still broken, even though we have been forgiven, and must struggle with sin.

For those of us who receive the peace offered to us in Christ, the day will come when we no longer have to live in the tension of this “half-peace,” where we have been made whole and right with God but also deal with our own brokenness. The day will come when all is made right, and we get a picture of this in Revelation 21. I invite you to read this beautiful chapter.

Some of my favorite images from the chapter are:

“...there was no longer any sea...” (verse 1)

The sea represented chaos and was fearful and unpredictable. The fact that there will no longer be any sea when all things are made right means that there will be no more chaos, no more scary and unpredictable events. There will be peace.

“On no day will its gates ever be shut...” (verse 25)

Gates were shut to protect against enemies and attacks. When all things are made right in the end, there will be no more enemies, no one left to fear. Locking doors or closing gates would not even make sense, because no one will threaten or hurt others again. There are no enemies; there will be peace.

“There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (verse 4)

Sorrow is no more, for there is no reason for sorrow. The hurts and injustices of the current order are gone, and only peace remains. Wholeness, completeness, and health will be ours one day, and such true peace is possible because Jesus came. *God, let us live in peace with you and lead others to your peace, so we can long without hesitation for your second coming, when all will be made right again.*

When you read the passages of what peace will ultimately look like, what is your reaction?

How might part of this peace be real in your life here and now?

Week 3 – Joy

When a married couple has been attempting to have a child and discovers they are expecting a baby, there are few times in life more joyful. The thought of having a child to love and raise is overwhelming, wonderful, and exciting. It can be an incredibly joyful thing.

I will never forget the feeling I had when I first found out I was going to be a father. I had to sit down. There was a large measure of trepidation about the great responsibility I was entering into. But more than anything, I was excited. I was overjoyed at the blessing.

I think this is rather typical, especially when a child is wanted and anticipated. But the picture we get in the New Testament of Mary and Joseph is anything but one of utter joy when they found out Mary was pregnant with Jesus. There may have been joy, but other emotions were primary.

Matthew tells us that when Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, found out she was pregnant, he was, understandably, not joyful. Instead, it seems he felt hurt, angry, and confused. You can tell he was, as Matthew tells us, a righteous man, because even while hurt and angry he still shows love to Mary. He decides to break up with her quietly and not make a stink about it publicly, helping her avoid the disgrace or discipline she might have received. What great love from a man who had just found out his fiancé was pregnant with someone else's child!

But in a dream, Joseph is told that it was actually not another man's child—it was *God's* child. And he was told that this child would save humanity from their sins! I cannot imagine what Joseph's emotions were at that point. His hurt and anger over Mary being pregnant must then have been replaced by confusion about how a baby could be God's child. I wonder if he felt totally overwhelmed about what it all meant—for him, for Mary, and for their future.

Likewise, Luke tells us that an angel informed Mary she would have a son, and we see in this exchange that Mary is also troubled and confused. In the end, she responds with incredible faith and trust in God, simply saying, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said." (Luke 1:38) But surely she felt uncertainty and fear over what the angel had told her. In their culture a woman could be put to death for cheating on her husband or fiancé, so there was real potential for severe consequences, especially if Joseph had chosen to take the vengeful route. As stressful as it is for any women to find out she is going to be mother, Mary had just been told she was going to be the mother of the Messiah! Talk about overwhelming.

To compound their confusion and fear, they faced real danger when Herod found out about the child. As the King of Jerusalem, Herod did not like hearing the rumor that a child had recently been born who would be King of the Jews. The Magi had told him this news when they came seeking to worship the child. He asked the Magi to come back and tell him when they found him "so that I too may go and worship him." (Matthew 2:8) In fact this vicious ruler planned to murder the child when he found him in order to protect his own power. Talk about a fear-inducing reality for young parents! Now they and their baby were in real physical danger!

In another dream, Joseph was warned to take the child and Mary and escape to Egypt to escape Herod's plots to kill their child. I can't imagine how terrifying that would be. And on top of all that, they were now forced to live in a foreign country far away from family and all they knew in order to protect their child from being murdered. Let's just say the early years of Jesus' life were not pure joy for this young family.

Certainly Mary and Joseph had moments of quiet joy and awe that God had actually chosen them for this incredible work. Certainly they were excited that at last God was moving in their midst—even in their lives—to rescue and redeem Israel. But this joy was tempered and subdued by all the uncertainty and fear related to Jesus' coming.

Contrast those reactions with the reactions we see from the others in the story who become aware of Jesus' coming. When others became aware of the truth that the Messiah had come, the reaction we see over and over again is unbridled joy. People are utterly overwhelmed by the joyous news of Jesus' birth, knowing it meant everything was going to change! They could not contain their emotions.

One example are the Magi. We have no idea who these guys really were, or how on earth they knew that the King of the Jews had been born. But they must have been in tune with God, whoever they were, because they were absolutely right. They traveled "from the east", which presumably was a *long distance away*, just to catch a glimpse of the child and worship him. Talk about excitement! When they finally saw the child (perhaps a toddler or young boy by this time) they "bowed down and worshiped him." (Matthew 2:11) They were totally overjoyed at having found Jesus, and bowed down before him. They got it; this was world-changing. Then they excitedly gave him some of the finest, most expensive gifts known to man at this time. They gave him gifts suited for a king. There was no uncertainty or fear for the Magi related to Jesus' birth. There was only joy.

Also think about the shepherds. They weren't quite as sophisticated as the Magi, and had no idea that just around the corner a baby was born that would change the world forever. When the angel appeared to them in the middle of the night, they were afraid. But listen to what the angel told them, "*Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.*" (Luke 1:10-11) From the start they were told this was *incredible news*, news that will bring *great joy*, news that is for *all people*. The shepherds believed and rushed off to Bethlehem to see. They found it just like the angel said they would—they saw Mary, and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. They too were overjoyed, and they spread the word about Jesus and praised God for these things. This incredible news brought incredible joy.

There was also a man named Simeon who was completely overjoyed at the sight of Jesus. Simeon was an old faithful Israelite who served at the Temple. When Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple to present him to the Lord, Simeon came right up to them and was overflowing with joy and thanks to God. God's Spirit had told Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. The moment he saw the child, he knew. He took Jesus in his arms and he praised God 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)

One glimpse of Jesus and it was clear to this servant of God that this baby was the long-awaited Messiah, who would bring light to *all people*, both Jews and Gentiles. He was so overjoyed that his eyes got to see the Messiah that he was ready to die in peace! That is joy!

The coming of Jesus into the world, the Advent, is truly *the most joyous news in the history of the universe*. God himself had skin on, walked the earth, and ultimately took our punishment for sin. Through Jesus we now have a path to renewal, to redemption, and to forgiveness. At last we are saved from the bondage of our sin and from death itself. It is the best news in history...

When you think of Christmas, of Jesus coming into the world, does it inspire joy in you? Not like a polite smile, or a little warmth in your heart, but unbridled joy? Does it make you want to jump up and down with abandon like a child? Does it make you want to fall on your face in awe and elation over the incredible news?

Or, perhaps, has the familiarity of the story dulled that joy? Has your joy fizzled because you've forgotten that this most joyous of news is what Christmas is really all about in the first place? Has the American version of Christmas, with its focus on "quality family time" and giving and receiving presents and a man in a

red suit, perhaps distracted you from the point of Christmas? Perhaps for you Christmas is more characterized by stress and busyness than it is by joy?

If so, we need to go back to the beginning, to the story of Jesus' birth. We need to realize how this event, the coming of God to the earth in flesh, was the culmination of thousands of years of God's plan at work. It was the answer to prayers of thousands of Israelites for thousands of years, the path to redemption and hope for the entire world. And it all started with this incredibly joyous, wonderful news: Today the Savior has been born – he is the Messiah.

In what ways does Christmas bring you joy?

In what ways can joy be swallowed up during Christmas?

Week 4 – Love

Last night, as I was preparing to head out of town for a few days, I was saying goodbye to my children. I knelt down to give my youngest daughter Kate, who is 3, a hug goodbye. She reached up and gave me a big squeeze around my neck, patted me on the back, and said, “You’re the best daddy. I love you so much.”

Today I can just think of that moment and start to cry. I don’t know if my heart could be any more full of love than it is for her. I love her more than I can possibly express in words; I would do anything for her.

Put that picture in your mind: a father who loves his child so much he would do anything for her. The truth is that this is the picture we get of our Heavenly Father throughout the Old Testament. He loves his children so much he would give them anything. He would do anything to show them his love, to protect them, to provide for them. Sometimes he disciplines them, something any good father will do for his children, but is eager for them to learn from it so he can quickly restore them and again.

It’s easy to miss this love when reading the Old Testament, because so much of the Old Testament is full of prophetic warnings about the punishment that would come to the Israelites if they didn’t repent and turn back toward God. Prophet after prophet was called by God to warn his people that they were going to be punished if they didn’t start making better choices—if they didn’t return to being faithful to God. What does it tell us about God that he called so many prophets to go and warn his people, to plead with them to change and warn them of what would happen if they didn’t? I think it shows us how deeply God loved them, and how sorry he was that he would have to discipline them. A Father who loved his children less would have seen their disobedience and just lashed out at them; God gave his people warning after warning and chance after chance to stop their disobedience and change course.

Unfortunately, his children didn’t listen. They often ignored the warnings. Jeremiah was one of the prophets God called to proclaim to his people that they needed to repent or they would be punished. He prophesied again and again that Jerusalem would be conquered and destroyed, and that they would be carried off into exile, if they did not repent. They didn’t listen, and by the end of the book of Jeremiah we see the people carried off into exile and Jerusalem destroyed, just as he had been prophesying for years.

Yet near the end of the book of Jeremiah he gets a word from God that is different in tone. It’s almost as if in the midst of God’s anger, and on the verge of this terrible punishment his people will receive, his heart is still so full of love that he must remind the people how he really feels. I picture God’s eyes full of tears, all red, a wounded and distraught Father who is so sad for his children. His words are full of love and hope and carry through the entire chapter of Jeremiah 31. I encourage you to read that entire chapter now. Here are some excerpts:

The people who survive the sword will find favor in the desert; I will come and give rest to Israel. (v. 2)

I have loved you with an everlasting love... I will build you up again, and you will be rebuilt. (vv. 3-4)

Again you will plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria... I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth... They will come with weeping; they will pray as I bring them back. I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel’s father. (vv. 5, 8, 9)

Hear the word of the Lord, O nations; proclaim it in distant coastlands: “He who scattered Israel will gather them and will watch over his flock like a shepherd.” (v. 10)

They will be like a well-watered garden, and they will sorrow no more. (v. 12)

I will turn their mourning into gladness; I will give them comfort and joy instead of sorrow. (v. 13)

There is hope for your future, declares the Lord. (v. 17)

I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (v. 34)

Isn't that beautiful? Some think of God's punishment of Israel and the foreboding prophets he sent, and think of a vengeful, uncaring God who simply wants "adherents," who simply wants rule-followers. But this is not at all the picture we get of our Father God here. We see a loving, compassionate, gracious, patient, and forgiving Father. That is the heart of our Father, and that is the heart he has for each of us: he loves us with an everlasting love, a deep and unfading and true love. He loves us even more than I love my daughter; he has known each of us since before we were conceived, and would do *anything* for us.

We often talk about how God loved us so much he was willing to die on a splintery cross, and truly in that picture we see a sacrificial love we cannot even comprehend. But God's sacrificial, humble love is just as evident thirty-some years before that, when he willingly became a human infant and was laid in a splintery manger. He loved us so much, even in our weakness, our frailty—that he was willing to take on our frailty. And he didn't descend as a muscular Savior King ready to rescue; he came as the frailest of us: a helpless infant in a mother's womb, born to the poorest of parents.

We see in the Nativity a Father so desperate to love and save his children that he would literally become a child. He laid down his power, his rights, his authority. *His desire was always, from the beginning, to enjoy us and love us and have a relationship with us, and for us to enjoy him and love him and have a relationship with him.* To make this possible, he went from his throne to a womb, and from splinters to splinters...

As we prepare for your coming, Jesus, remind us of our Father's great love—love so deep he would literally do anything for us. A love so true and lasting that he would literally never give up on us. A love that, even in the midst of great betrayal, looks forward to a time of reconciliation and hope. A love that forgives, long in advance of repentance... And as we prepare for you to come again, let that love be what characterizes us. Let us see our neighbors who are very far from you with our Father's heart—a heart that loves them deeply, has hope for their future, and forgives before they seek forgiveness. Let us remember all we have been forgiven, and the great debt we owe you, and let us express that grace and mercy to the world around us.

Week 5 – Light

Isaiah was another prophet who, like Jeremiah, was called by God to warn the people that punishment was coming if they didn't turn from their sin and return to God. Also like Jeremiah, in the midst of his predictions of gloom and judgment he got visions of God's deep love for the people, of his promise for grace in the future.

The 8th chapter of Isaiah ends in a dire prediction about the lost and sinful Israelites who are looking for hope in the wrong places, who are consulting mystics and spiritists to find the truth, when they could simply consult the Source of all truth. Isaiah says they will become distressed, hungry, and enraged, even at God, in their confusion. The last verse of the chapter says, *"Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness."*

What a bleak picture! I cannot think of anything more fearful and chilling than being thrust into utter darkness, without hope for any light again. The Bible describes life without God as darkness.

Right in the midst of this bleak picture, Isaiah catches one of those visions from God, a vision that reminds him that this bleak picture will not be the end, and that God is not done with these sinful people. Here is what chapter 9 says:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan – The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing their plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor... 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. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

(Isaiah 9:1-4, 6-7)

Though the Israelites had brought darkness on themselves by their actions, and though more darkness was coming through the punishment they were going to receive, light would dawn—a great light! This light would begin with a child, who came by way of Galilee, and whose reign would literally never end. He would be called God himself, the Everlasting One, and he would rescue them from their darkness and despair.

This passage flabbergasts me. I cannot believe it was written hundreds of years before Jesus. Matthew can't seem to believe it either, and quotes this passage early on in his gospel to show that this prophecy had been fulfilled in Jesus (Matthew 4). Light has come; it has broken into the darkness and shattered its hold on us!

As we spoke about earlier on in Advent, the Israelites were looking for this child who would rise up and lead Israel to glory, but they were not looking for one like Jesus to do it. Most were looking for a strong warrior-king who would bring peace and prestige through beating back their oppressors militarily. They were looking for a king in the line of David to act like David, and reestablish Israel as God's nation, bringing back her glory of old.

Yet Jesus looked different. He was born and raised humbly. When he started his ministry, he spoke not of kicking out the oppressive Romans but of submission. He did not show disdain for the Romans but compassion, like when he healed the centurion's servant. And though many Israelites did not recognize the

light, he was the light they had been waiting for... As John 1:5 says, “The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”

However, Jesus wanted it to be clear. He said it himself, very clearly: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12) Pretty bold claim, right? Yet Jesus had no doubts. Though he was humble and gentle, he knew precisely who he was and why he had come. For those searching for the light, he did not want them to be confused—he was here! And for those of us who follow Jesus today, we can cling to his words: we will *never walk in darkness*. We will have the light of life. What a beautiful promise.

Yet it is clear to us that although this great light entered the darkness, and though Jesus changed history forever, darkness still remains. The coming of the Light into the world has made a way for all to step out of the darkness, yet his coming has not banished all darkness. We live in the *already-not yet* of God’s Kingdom. The light has already come, but it has not yet banished the darkness. Redemption and forgiveness have already come, but sin is not yet destroyed. Jesus has already come, but he has not yet come again. The work is not complete. Why? I think it’s because it is God’s desire for *all of his children*, the entire world, to come into the light. It is his desire for all to understand he loves them, to follow Jesus and be forgiven.

So as we celebrate Jesus’ coming this Advent, and as we anticipate his second coming, what does God expect of us? If we follow the Light, and if our lives are so full of joy and hope and grace that we will never walk in darkness again, we must share this light with the world! We must be “little lights” that do the work Jesus did—in our neighborhoods and workplaces and families. As Jesus said, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-16)

Isn’t it interesting that Jesus said both “I am the light of the world” and “You are the light of the world”?!? That’s because it’s our role as his followers to be bringers of light, just as he was! Since we’ll never be in darkness as we follow him, we must not try to hide that light, or be respectfully silent about it, as if we are still in darkness like most everyone else! We must make it obvious that we are different, that we have true life, and that we follow a risen Savior who has lit up our lives! Following Jesus authentically, and spreading his light to the world around us, is the best way to prepare for his coming...

As Romans 13:12 says, “The night is almost over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.” I learn two things from this verse. First, even though we have been given the light of God’s forgiveness and love and freedom, we still must choose the light over the darkness. Sin surrounds us. We must daily choose to stay in the light and not wander back into darkness. Second, we only have so many more days before Christ returns and brings an end to the darkness. *While there is time, we must passionately bring Christ’s hope and forgiveness and peace to the world around us. With the time we have on this earth, let us share the Light of the world with those around us who still don’t know Him.*

In that wonderful description of heaven in Revelation 21, we are told, “The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp... There will be no night there.” (Revelation 21:23, 25)

Lord, thank you that you never gave up on the Israelites, even though they turned their backs on you. And Lord, thank you that you never give up on us, even though we sometimes walk back into the darkness you rescued us from.

Thank you that you brought your glorious light to the world when you came to earth as a baby, and thank you that you made a way for all of us to be in the light through the cross.

Please help us, Lord, not to fear the darkness around us but to use the days we have on this earth to bring your light to the lost, to tell them they need not live in darkness any longer.

Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming.

Prepare us, Lord Jesus, for your coming.

We want to walk in the light and be prepared for your coming.

And help us give all we can to your work now, knowing that one day all darkness will be banished forever, and you yourself will be our Light. We love you...