

Advent Study 2016

Below are four study sessions based on the four Scripture passages and the themes we will be using in worship each Sunday this Advent: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Faith.

1) Hope - Isaiah 2:1-5

2:1 This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

*2 In the last days
the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.
3 Many peoples will come and say,*

*"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.
He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."*

*The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.*

*4 He will judge between the nations
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.*

*Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.*

*5 Come, descendants of Jacob,
let us walk in the light of the Lord.*

During Advent, Christians turn their attention to the prophets - especially those that announce the coming Messiah. Advent invites us to recall a time before Christ had arrived, a time in which people longed for deliverance, a time when the world was not as it should be. By imagining the time before the light of Christ shone in the darkness, we can experience afresh the joy of Christ entering the world in Bethlehem, the joy of Christ entering our lives here and now. The prophets remind us of the expectations that preceded Jesus, and all the hopes he fulfilled. This child makes all things new.

As important as the prophets are, it's the Gospels that take center stage during Advent. At no other time do we focus so intently on stories of Jesus' life. I think one of the reasons we love Advent and Christmas is because it is a time of storytelling. We love stories, and we learn from them. Perhaps surprisingly, Christians have long begun Advent by focusing - not on the story of Jesus' birth - but on the very end of his ministry, on the passages where Jesus speaks of the

end of the world and his second coming. And this is no accident. As we remember Christ's coming we are invited to look forward to his coming again.

So we find ourselves in a similar place to the prophets: waiting for Christ to come. And when we read the prophets we also see that - though we live on the other side of Christ's coming - in many ways we still have the same longings as those who lived so long ago. We might wonder how much has really changed? We still live in a world of darkness into which the light needs to shine.

Christians believe that most important events in all history have already taken place in the incarnation, cross, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And though that decisive victory has been won, in this life, the powers of sin and death still hold; we still need a savior. In the hope of the prophets - a hope that was not met for centuries to come - we learn to be people of hope. We learn to trust that God has not forgotten his promises, we learn to wait with patient expectation, and to prepare the way of the Lord who has come and will come again.

We live in a world in which the mountain of the Lord's house does not appear to be established as the highest but even seems to be eroding. The nations are not streaming to it, the people do not seek to be taught his ways or to walk in his paths. The situation, it seems, is getting worse, not better. How long, O Lord!? At times, despair comes more easily than hope. Advent reminds us that hope - though not easy - never disappoints. And so Isaiah even calls us to imagine the day when people take their weapons and transform them into farming implements. Do we dare hope that this could be true?! We must. Come Lord Jesus!

- 1. How does having to wait affect hope? What else makes hope difficult?**
- 2. To what extent have these things Isaiah prophesied already been fulfilled? And for what do we still wait? Do you hope for these things?**
- 3. Is it our role to help fulfill these prophecies? Or can only God make them come true?**
- 4. How is Christ's second coming like (and different from) his first?**
- 5. Is Christ's return Good News? For everyone?**
- 6. Isaiah envisions a very tangible manifestation of the reign of God: people will beat their swords and spears into plowshares and pruning hooks. This is what it looks like when the kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. So, difficult question: is the salvation Christ brings "spiritual" - that is, invisible, in our hearts and minds? Or is it in the "earthly", material realities of the world? Or is it both?**

2) Peace - Isaiah 11:1-10

*11 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

*2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—*

*3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
6 The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling[a] together;
and a little child will lead them.
7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
8 The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
9 They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to
him, and his resting place will be glorious.*

During Advent Christians have long joined their voices with the heavenly host to proclaim, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests!" (Luke 2:14). We declare that this child who has come and will come again is indeed the "Prince of Peace". And yet, we face the reality that we do not see much peace on earth. In the language of the passage from last week (Isaiah 2:4), people have not stopped making war; disputes and divisions, far from being settled, seem to multiply. Where is this peace on earth!?

At least in the West, the Christmas season is accompanied by images of things like snow silently falling on a cozy cottage with a warm fire and cookies just out of the oven. I think such scenes arise in part from our desire to find a little peace on earth - a peace that seems attainable. But, of course, even this can be hard to attain; our own homes are often not nearly as peaceful as we would like, our relationships are strained, we live with anxiety and fear. If Jesus really is who the angels say, then how come we find so little peace in our lives - not to mention in the world?

It might be tempting to conclude that peace Jesus brings is in our hearts, the peace of salvation, peace between us and God. This is "spiritual" peace and, of course, Jesus does bring this - but not only that. It is striking that Isaiah's prophecies we read both this week and last are very worldly; they are about the concrete realities of our lives. It would be easy for us to give up on peace and earth, this outward peace, and focus on a merely inward peace. One of the wonders of Advent, of the incarnation, is that we are reminded that this child really does make ALL things new. But again, we need patience.

Isaiah 11 envisions a messiah who will be filled with the Spirit, judging righteously, bringing justice for the poor of the earth. But then the picture becomes even more incredible: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the cow and the bear, the child and the viper - all will live in peace! They will neither harm or destroy, for the whole earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. Everything will be transformed! This is what John saw in Revelation when he said "then I saw a new heaven and a new earth!" (21:1) The kingdom of God really will come on Earth as it is in heaven, and this begins - and ends - in Jesus.

The challenge for us to continue hoping for a peace that still seems a long way off, to trust that these things really will come true. Advent teaches us to wait patiently, longingly for the peace that will come. We must not grow impatient, reducing God's peace to something invisible, nor can we be like the false prophets who deny reality: "Peace, peace' they say, when there is no peace" (Jeremiah 6:14, 8:11). Instead, we proclaim that God entered the flesh and blood reality of our world - not to condemn the world - but to redeem it. And when this king returns in final victory he will establish his reign and his kingdom will have no end. In the meantime we, the king's subjects, are called to prepare the way of the Lord.

1. **What is peace? Where do you feel peaceful?**
2. **Has there ever been peace on earth?**
3. **What is the peace that Isaiah declares the Christ will bring? Is this how we usually think about what Christ did/does/will do?**
4. **Do we think of Christ's peace as been more spiritual or more material? (You'll want to say both, of course, but be honest!)**
5. **What will it look like when Christ returns? How do these prophecies tell us about eternal life?**
6. **Is it our job to help bring peace on earth here and now?**

3) Joy - Isaiah 35:1-10

*1 The desert and the parched land will be glad;
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom.*

*Like the crocus, 2 it will burst into bloom;
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.*

*The glory of Lebanon will be given to it,
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon;
they will see the glory of the Lord,
the splendor of our God.*

*3 Strengthen the feeble hands,
steady the knees that give way;*

*4 say to those with fearful hearts,
"Be strong, do not fear;*

your God will come,

*he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution
he will come to save you.”*

*5 Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.*

*6 Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.
Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.*

*7 The burning sand will become a pool,
the thirsty ground bubbling springs.
In the haunts where jackals once lay,
grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.*

*8 And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.*

*9 No lion will be there,
nor any ravenous beast;
they will not be found there.
But only the redeemed will walk there,
10 and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

One of the most popular Christmas carols proclaims, “Joy to the World, the Lord is come! Let Earth receive her king!” And indeed, the coming of Jesus is good news for the whole world, for all of creation. So we read in Isaiah that the desert will flower, the wilderness will flourish and bear witness to the glory of God. Waters will break forth and the burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground will become bubbling springs. What was dead will come to life! The earth itself rejoices!¹

We live in cold, rainy Luxembourg, but for those literally living in the desert, this would’ve been a deeply resonate image. It provided them - and us - a glimpse of the Good News that is to come to us, to the world. We see one picture of what it means when Jesus declares, “Behold, I make

¹ Luke tells us this story of when Jesus entered Jerusalem:

19:37 “When he came near the place where the road goes down the Mount of Olives, the whole crowd of disciples began joyfully to praise God in loud voices for all the miracles they had seen:

38 “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord!”[b]

“Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”

39 Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples!”

40 “I tell you,” he replied, “if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

ALL things new.” Once more we are reminded that the Jesus’s coming does not just affect the spiritual/invisible but all the visible, material creation.

But it is hard for us to take joy because we do not always see these visions coming true in our world, in our lives. Again, we live in the times between the times, the time between when Jesus’s incarnation, death, and resurrection has changed everything, and the time when this change takes full effect, in the last days, when the king comes again in final victory to establish his reign. We live in the already/not yet. We trust that he has come and that he will come again, but finally we walk by faith, not by sight. We are to maintain our hope that the Lord’s peace is indeed coming, and so we take joy in what has begun, and in what is to come.

Christians have long distinguished joy from happiness. Happiness comes and goes depending on the circumstances, but joy abides. When assailed by the powers of sin and death, we may rightly refuse happiness, but we should still be joyful. Christians see that joy is founded upon the hope of the peace to come, a joy that allows us to live as if it is indeed already here.

One day, the weak will be made strong, blind will see, the deaf will hear, the lame will leap like a deer, the mute will sing for joy. God, in Christ, will redeem all creation, but God, who in Christ took human form, takes particular interest in humans created in His image. All of our brokenness will be taken up and transformed, all wholeness and goodness restored:

*Those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

- 1. What is joy? Do you have joy? Do you think you’re more often happy, or joyful? What makes joy difficult to have and keep? What brings you joy?**
- 2. What does it mean for the earth to rejoice?**
- 3. Do you think of these prophecies more metaphorically or more literally? That is, when it speaks of the desert blossoming, is this the real, earthly desert, or rather does it mean something like “the dry places in our lives”? (Here again, though you might want to say “both”, be honest.)**
- 4. Does God intend to redeem only humans or all of creation? What is included in “All”?**
- 5. Do you ever become frustrated or impatient that these old prophecies are still unfulfilled? Would you like to see these things coming true? Or, perhaps, where do we see them coming true?**
- 6. How can we have joy here and now based on something that we haven’t seen that we’re promised is coming in the future?**

4) Faith - Matthew 1:18-25

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us").

24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

The Christmas story is all about faith. Before we could have faith in Jesus - before he could come to us in Bethlehem - Mary and Joseph had to have faith in the message the angels delivered. Luke tells the story of the angel coming to Mary, and Matthew tells the story of the angel coming to Joseph. It is interesting that the angel appeared to them separately (and that no Gospel tells of both). And it also seems quite possible that Mary didn't tell Joseph about the angel telling her she will be found with child - or perhaps that she did, but he didn't believe her. We don't know. But we do know that, when it became obvious that she was pregnant, Matthew tells us that Joseph began to consider how to respectfully dismiss her. He did not know (or believe?) that the child was from the Holy Spirit until the angel appeared.

We are told that Joseph was a faithful man, so we might assume that, after hearing from the angel, it would be easy to be faithful. But surely it was not. Who has heard of such a thing as a virgin birth!? In a patrilineal society it would've been unimaginable to have a firstborn for whom he was not the (genetic) father. And then there's the embarrassment of being engaged to a pregnant woman. The future Joseph imagined (the future any man would've imagined) is endangered by the angel's words. Nothing about this is easy, but Joseph remained faithful.

And God too is faithful in this story, in ways we might not immediately realize. Because we (rightly) think of God as omniscient, omnipotent, etc., we can forget to notice the great act of faith it is for the Father to entrust his Son to this as yet unmarried couple. God enters the world humble, lowly, and - perhaps above all - vulnerable. That God knows how the story ends does not make it any less remarkable. God comes to us, as one of us, and put his life in our hands. This is an act of infinite self-emptying, vulnerability, and faith.

This is the faith that makes Immanuel possible. Mary and Joseph trust that God is faithful, but God also trusts that they will be faithful.² This tells us a lot about God - and what God thinks about us. God became intimately involved in human affairs, bound his life to our life, his flesh to our flesh, in order to deliver us from our sins. And this incarnate God was willing to suffer our rejection in the hope our acceptance, to suffer our faithlessness in the hope we would come to faith. The Good News of Christmas is that God is faithful to do whatever it takes to make all things new - including especially our relationship with Him. God give us faith!

1. **Do you think Mary told Joseph what the angel told her? Or did he just not believe?**
2. **Was it easier for Joseph to do what the angel told him? Or follow his original plan? Did he have a choice?**
3. **What does it mean for God to be faithful? For God to trust? Did God take a risk with Mary and Joseph? Or was it always sure to work out as it did?**
4. **Did God have to become incarnate? What does it mean that God is Immanuel?**
5. **Or was there another way to save people from their sins? Why did God come to us as a baby, born of a woman? What does this tell us about God?**
6. **Does God trust us? What makes it hard for us to trust God? Do relationships always require trust?**

² If it seems odd to speak of God trusting (which suggests uncertainty), consider the famous story of God testing Abraham. Just as Abraham prepares to strike Issac, an angel calls from heaven declaring, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Strange as it seems, God apparently needs to verify whether or not Abraham can be trusted before establishing the covenant.