

2021

Advent

CHRIST HAS COME, CHRIST WILL COME AGAIN

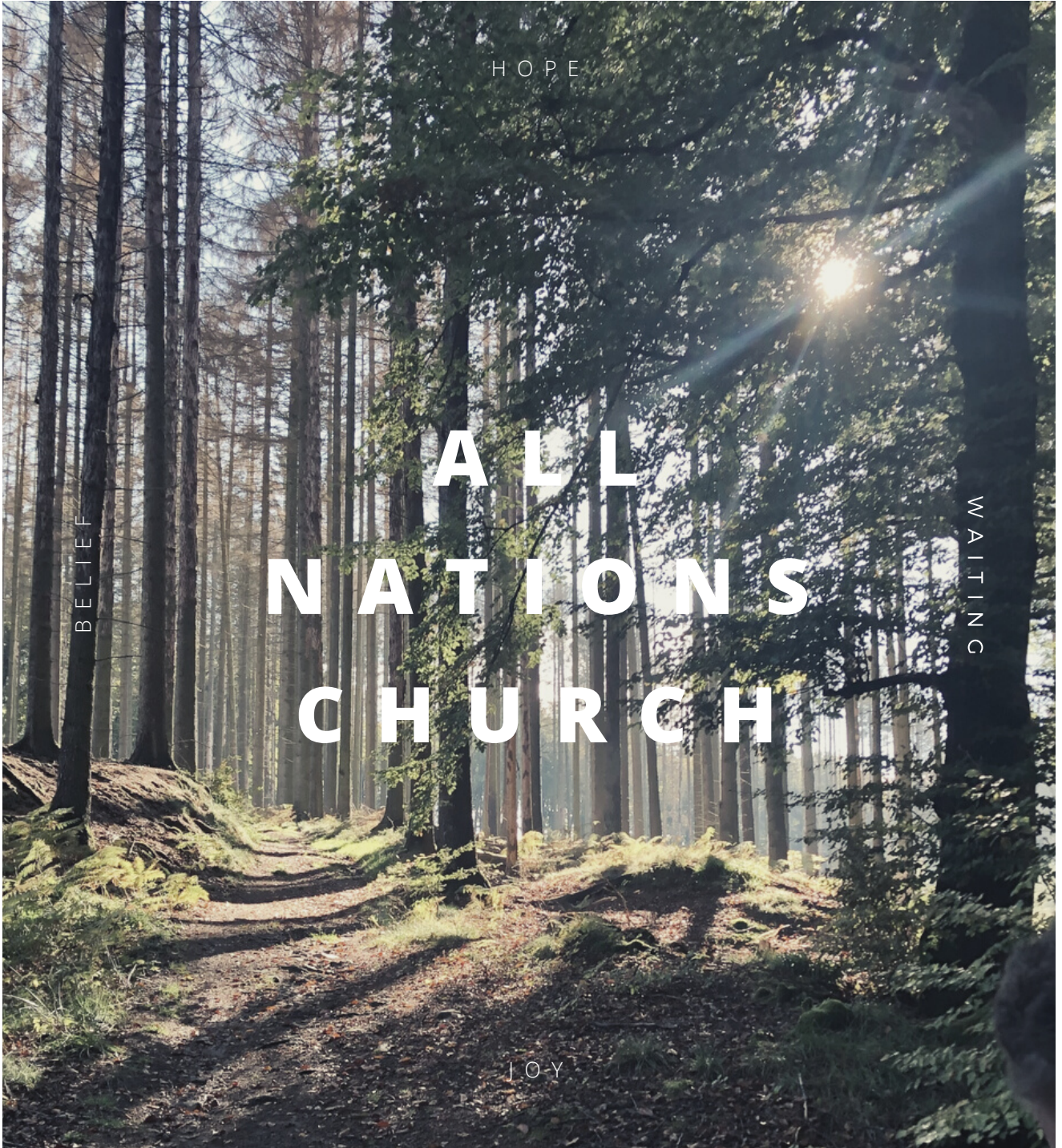
HOPE

BELIEF

ALL
NATIONS
CHURCH

WAITING

JOY





Christ has come, Christ will come again

Advent Study 2021

Advent is a season in which we celebrate that Christ has come and in which anticipate that Christ will come again. We put ourselves in the position of Israel, a people walking in darkness waiting for their light to shine, and, at the same time, we are reminded that we are a people who still, in so many ways, walk in darkness and long for the light to shine in our lives and in our world. We find ourselves living in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet”. And this year especially, as we enter the 22nd(!) month of living with a pandemic, we wait for the Lord to deliver us from this oppression, to set us free and to finally, once and for all, deliver us into glorious light. If there was ever a time we needed to learn the lessons which Advent seeks to teach us, it's right now.

This study follows four passages from Old Testament prophets which we will read in worship this year as we light the Advent candles. These passages proclaim the messiah and the promises already fulfilled even as they also point to what is still yet to come.

They invite us to enter the experience of Israel awaiting its messiah so that we might rejoice in the Good News of Christ, but they also teach us to wait patiently for Christ to come and make all things new.



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2021

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Hope

WEEK ONE

Jeremiah 33:14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness."



During the season of Advent we simultaneously place ourselves in two different times which are at once very similar and also very different. We place ourselves in the position of Israel, longing for it's Messiah to come, and we find ourselves (as we have for 2000 years) waiting for Christ to come again. "The days are surely coming..." the Lord said via the prophet Jeremiah to the Israelites, and the Lord says the same to us. The days are surely coming when all God's promises will come true, when the kingdom will come on Earth as it is in Heaven.

But the challenge for us is that "the days" have been coming for a long, long time and we're still waiting. It's hard to maintain hope when the wait is long, and especially when the kingdom of God seems to be getting no closer (and maybe even drifting further away). Jeremiah delivered the word of the Lord to the Israelites in the 6th Century BC, but it would still be many centuries before that word was fulfilled. All those who first heard this promise did not see it come true in their lifetimes. They must have begun to wonder when, if ever, God would finally keep this promise. It's remarkable then that Israel maintained hope throughout the centuries, and that in Jesus' day they still longed for the promise to be fulfilled.

Christians believe that Jesus did indeed fulfill this hope, that in him God's promises were kept and more. Jesus was a son of David, a branch springing forth from the broken royal tree, taking the throne of his forefather and ruling with power and authority. And yet, many of the Israelites didn't believe Jesus was the fulfillment of the promise exactly because Jesus didn't appear to fulfill the promise of passages like this one from Jeremiah. Where was (and is) the "justice and righteousness in the land"? When did Jerusalem ever "live in safety"? The Messiah will make these things come true, but did Jesus really do that?

One response we might make to these questions is that, although perhaps Jesus didn't fulfill these promises as imagined, he did indeed fulfill them and much, much more. Jesus didn't just deliver God's people from the Romans; he delivered them from the power of sin and death! He's not just an earthly king but a heavenly one! Those who didn't see Jesus for who he was (and is and will be forevermore) rejected him not because they'd hoped for too much but because they hoped for too little! Their sights were set on things here below rather than on the things above.

There's a lot of truth to that response. And yet, God's promise spoken by Jeremiah remains unfulfilled (unless, of course, we dramatically reinterpret what the fulfillment of that promise looks like). At Advent we long for Christ to come again exactly because we long for this promise, and many more like it, to be fulfilled; for the kingdoms of this world to become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever. We believe that in Jesus this promise has been fulfilled, that the outcome is certain, and yet in these many centuries of injustice and iniquity we still long to see the promises come true, not just in days that are coming but today.

The good news we celebrate at Christmas is that God is Emmanuel, that God is with us as one of us. At Christmas, Heaven comes to Earth, and Jesus taught us to pray for - to long for - the time when Heaven would come to Earth fully, when the two would be one and the same. The days are surely coming when the king returns to fully establish his kingdom on Earth as it is in Heaven, when justice and righteousness will reign, when there will be peace in Jerusalem and in all the Earth.



Hope

Week One Reflection Questions

1. Do you have much experience celebrating Advent? What, if anything, does the season mean to you? What has made Advent meaningful in the past? What do you hope for this Advent?
2. Does it sometimes seem as if God's promises are forever in the future? - that the "days are surely coming" but never seem to arrive? Do you find it hard to maintain hope? To remain patient?
3. In what ways has Jesus already fulfilled God's promises? And in what ways do these promises await fulfillment? Does our current situation seem more about the "already" of what God has done, or more about the "not yet" of what remains undone?
4. Where/when do we hope for God's promises to be fulfilled? Is it only in the life to come, after we've died? Or do we hope for life on Earth? Are these two different kinds of hope? Or are they one and the same?
5. What would it look like for justice and righteousness to reign? For there to be Peace on Earth? Is that just a nice idea - or a living hope? What, if any, is our role in making this promise come true here and now?

Waiting

WEEK TWO

Malachi 3:1-4

See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight-- indeed, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.

But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years.



At the outset of the previous section we noted that at Advent we simultaneously inhabit two different times separated by two millennia but which nevertheless overlap. We put ourselves in the position of Israel awaiting its Messiah and we find ourselves waiting for Christ to return. One of the joys of Advent is placing ourselves in the position of Israel as they walked in the darkness waiting for the light to shine so that we can experience, as if for the first time, the Good News that our savior has come. It's old news but it's still the best news.

We can imagine what it would've been like to long for the promised messiah, to wait for centuries and centuries for him to appear - finally! - and fulfill passages like this one from the prophet Malachi. At Advent, more than any other season, we read the prophets (ones like Malachi whom might never be read otherwise). It's from them that we learn what Israel hoped, and the ways that Jesus met that hope, which then informs the character of our own hope. We find it reassuring to know that these passages which spoke of the long-expected Jesus found their fulfillment upon his arrival. It's easy to see how first century Christians would've read this passage above as referring to John the Baptist ("my messenger who will prepare the way before me") and of Jesus the Lord whom they seek and found evidence of God's plan coming to fruition.

At Christmas we tend to focus on sweet baby Jesus (who doesn't cry(!) according to the famous carol "Away in a Manger") and the peaceful stillness of Bethlehem. It's an appealing but deceiving picture. The reality for Mary and Joseph was much more challenging, not only because Jesus surely cried (he was a baby!) but because of how, when, and why this child arrived. And the challenge of Jesus' arrival, this passage suggests, is ultimately a challenge forced upon not only his parents but all people: "Who can endure the day of his coming?"

At Advent we are called to remember that Christ has come and that Christ will come again. Jesus himself, toward the very end of his ministry, foretold his second coming (see Matthew 24:29-51 and parallels) and painted a picture that doesn't look much like "peace on earth". It will be a great and terrible day, for it will be a day of judgment. In the language of Malachi (which certainly informed Jesus' own description), the coming of the Lord is like a refining, purifying fire through which all must pass. (The good news is that gold and silver come out the other side!).

Is the coming of the Lord a day to fear or a day to anticipate? That's an interesting question that reveals much about what we believe and how we regard our standing before God (you'll get the chance to answer it for yourself soon!). In any case, the ultimate point of Jesus' words is that, whether we fear that day or look forward to it, we need to be ready, we all need to be like John the Baptist, the messenger who prepares the way of the Lord. If we fear that day, for ourselves and/or others, then we need to get ready. And if we look forward to it, like a celebrated guest coming to our home, then we need to get ready.

Jesus told us to maintain a constant state of vigilance, to live every moment as if this could be the day that he returns. Christians have been living like that (or trying to) for 20 centuries now. We've been waiting a long time, and we may need to wait a lot longer (or maybe not!). During Advent we are called to remember that, though he tarries, Christ is coming, and he hopes to find his servants doing the Master's business.



Waiting

Week Two Reflection Questions

1. Can you imagine what it would've been like to be an Israelite waiting (and waiting) for the messiah to come? And what would it have been like to know that, in your lifetime, the messiah has come?
2. What is it about fulfilled prophecies that we find reassuring? Why does it matter that God not only did something but always planned to do it?
3. What challenges did Jesus' arrival present to his parents, to his fellow Israelites, to the whole world?
4. Is the second coming of Jesus something to be feared? Or something to look forward to? Or both? Does it depend who you are? Do you like or dislike the idea of passing through a purifying fire?
5. What does it mean to wait for the Lord? In what ways do we need to be ready and active? And in what ways do we need to relax and be at peace?
6. What are some practical ways that we can ready ourselves for Jesus' return? What would you hope for Jesus to find you doing if he suddenly appeared?

Joy

WEEK THREE

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, O daughter Jerusalem! The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies. The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more. On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak.

The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it.

I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. At that time I will bring you home, at the time when I gather you; for I will make you renowned and praised among all the peoples of the earth, when I restore your fortunes before your eyes, says the LORD.



This is a joyful, triumphant passage. The original Hebrew text didn't include exclamation points(!), but English (and other) translations are right to add them. These are words not just to be read but to be exclaimed: Sing! Shout! Rejoice! Exult! Imagine what it would be like to await the day that this passage could be exclaimed, not just as a future hope, but as a present reality... and then for that day to finally come. What a joyful day that would be! And indeed it was.

But that doesn't mean that Jesus fulfilled this passage (and others) according to expectations. The Jews expected a very different kind of messiah, one who would deliver them from imperial occupation, set them free from their Roman oppressors, and give them military victory so that this humiliating national "disaster" would end and they would assume their rightful position as the greatest of nations, esteemed by all peoples of the Earth. And it's not hard to see how a passage like the one above could give shape to such an expectation.

One of the reasons so few of God's people believed in God's messiah is that he did not meet their expectations. But for those who believed, the task was to reread Scripture in light of Jesus and to discover what their expectations should've been if only they'd had eyes to see. Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures - if you interpreted them correctly.

So passages like this one in Zephaniah were reinterpreted not as foretelling the triumph of a literal warrior over literal oppressors, but as the triumph over the powers of sin and death. Jesus was a "warrior" in an ironic sense; he triumphed, not by defeating his enemies in battle but by submitting to death on a cross. Jesus won the ultimate victory.

And yet, there remains a sense in which the passage will not yet be fulfilled until Jesus returns. The kind of spiritual/allegorical reading described above gives expression to the truth we profess in the Gospel, that death had been defeated, peace with God restored, etc. But, despite Jesus having won the victory, the battle rages on. It's done so for two millennia, and for how long it will continue we have no idea. Even though Jesus fulfilled this passage in a way that exceeded what the Jews could possibly have imagined, Christians must still long for his passage to be fulfilled in a more literal sense.

Throughout the Gospels Jesus speaks of the kingdom of God coming on earth as it is in heaven (and, of course, he taught us to pray for just this). Christian hope is not so much about Jesus taking us out of this world, but of Jesus coming to the world to transform it. Christ has come and Christ will come again, and then the king will bring the fullness of the kingdom.

What Zephaniah describes looks a lot like how Revelation (20:1-5) envisages Christ's return:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

*"See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
4 he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away."*

5 And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."

Our hope is that Heaven really will come to Earth, that Heaven and Earth will be one. All will be well; all manner of things shall be well. All things - all things! - will be made new. What a joyful day that will be.



Joy

Week Three Reflection Questions

1. What kind of messiah does this passage in Zephaniah seem to describe? Can you imagine how it might have created the expectation of a messiah different from Jesus?
2. Can you imagine how early Christians (and Christians right now!) would have understood this passage to speak about Jesus? Does it seem clear to you that this speaks about him and what he accomplished? Or does it seem like a bit of a stretch?
3. Is it strange to think that Jews, who knew the Scriptures well and awaited their messiah, did not anticipate Jesus? What prevents us from interpreting Scripture rightly? Is it possible that Christians now do not rightly anticipate Christ's return?
4. Are you satisfied that Jesus has sufficiently fulfilled this passage from Zephaniah? Or is there still much left undone? What is it that we still hope for Jesus to do in the future?
5. In what ways is Jesus' victory final and complete? And in what ways do we await its ultimate completion? What is the cause of our present joy? And for what will we be yet even more joyful?

Belief

WEEK FOUR



Micah 5:2-5a

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.

Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.

Some things are hard to believe. They seem just too unlikely. If a “prophet” appeared declaring that Luxembourg would win the 2026 World Cup we would dismiss the person as woefully ignorant, if not completely crazy. Such a thing is impossible, we’d say. There are too many reasons why it could never happen. It’s the sort of thing you don’t even bother to hope for because it seems like a waste of time.

The prophet Micah declared that from the little town of Bethlehem, a great King who would feed his flock and give the people peace would come and rule Israel. If you were a resident of Bethlehem in, say, the fourth century BC, you lived your whole life knowing this promise was there in Scripture but never seeing it come true. You’d look around your little village thinking, “How could the Messiah possibly come from this place?” Every boy that was born you might, for a moment, consider if this could be the one, but then it’d become apparent that this wasn’t the messiah either. To believe the Messiah would come from Bethlehem required belief without apparent evidence. Maybe we misunderstood Micah? Could Micah have gotten it wrong!?

To be a Christian requires believing things that would've seemed impossibly unlikely from the vantage point of people before Christ appeared. The Messiah will be born in Bethlehem - but not only that - born to a poor family and laid in a manger. Who could imagine such a thing? The King must be high and exalted, right!? How could the Lord of all creation enter the world so vulnerable? And all that is easy to believe next to the literally unimaginable idea that the infinite, eternal, invisible God could take on finite, temporal, visible flesh. Whoever heard of such a thing!? God became human? Nonsense! (it would seem). And yet that is precisely what we believe.

And this can be hard for us to believe. God became incarnate in Jesus some 2000 years ago - and it changed everything (without seeming to change much of anything). There's a way in which we can "believe" this without really believing it. It seems a tale from long ago, not a present, living reality. To many of us it can seem as if God hasn't done much in a long time, which makes us wonder if God ever really did in the first place. And that can make it hard to believe that Christ really is coming again (at any moment!). Day after day, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, Christ's return doesn't seem to be any closer.

Christians have always been tempted to believe that Christ has already done everything that he's ever going to do. Many of the Corinthians (to whom Paul wrote) apparently believed that everything was already finished, all hopes realized. And while that seems silly from the perspective of Christian theology/doctrine, from the perspective of one's day-to-day experience it can be easy to live as if this is as good as it gets, as if nothing is ever going to change.

During Advent we find ourselves in the position of rejoicing in what God has already done while we also long for God to do much more. So we read Micah and rejoice that Christ was born in Bethlehem, that he fed the crowds not only with loaves and fishes but also with the words of life. But we also read Micah and long for the day when Christ shall return, not just to rule over all Israel, but over all creation; when the kingdom of God will come on Earth as it is in Heaven, the majesty of the Lord will be revealed, and all will be perfect peace. This is what we believe: Christ has come, and Christ will come again.

Belief

Week Four Reflection Questions



1. Imagine you lived in Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born: Could you possibly have believed that this baby was the Lord? Wouldn't it seem too unlikely (even if you were familiar with Micah)? Do we expect the really important things in life to happen near to us? Or far away (in time and space)?
2. Pretend for a moment you knew nothing of Jesus: What would you imagine it would look like for God to come to Earth? Does the humbleness of Jesus' earthly condition make it hard to believe he came from heaven? Or easier? Similarly....
3. Does the fact that Jesus arrived in Bethlehem so long ago make it hard to believe that he's who we say he is? And does the fact that Christians have awaited his return for so long make it harder to believe that he's coming again? How do we believe in what has happened and what will happen when nothing (seems) to be happening?
4. Is your belief/faith more about what God has done in the past or about what God will do in the future? Do you focus more on the fact that Christ has come or that Christ will come again?
5. How important is it that we believe that Christ will return? How does this affect our hope? The way we live? The way we read Scripture?



ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANCL MEMBER ALMYRA KNEVEL PERSSON

