

ADVENT INTRO

Today is the beginning of the Advent season. Advent is a time of fasting, of waiting, of anticipating. The Church has always celebrated Advent as waiting. In waiting for Christmas, we remember how Israel waited for their king to come, how anxious they were for the Messiah to rescue them. So it's appropriate that Advent culminates in Christmas, the birth of Jesus. God's coming into this world.

But there's another aspect of Advent we overlook. We know that God isn't finished with the world yet. That even though Jesus was born, lived, died and rose again to defeat evil and death, it's not over yet. We are waiting for Jesus' second coming just as we once waited for his first coming.

So this Advent season is both celebration and longing. It's both party and hope. Jesus has come. Jesus will come again.

Historically, Christians have always looked forward to the End of the World. So during Advent, we're going to spend some time in the book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible. Revelation is a scary book to most people. It's hard to understand and has a lot of terrifying imagery in it.

But Christians for 2,000 years have found hope, comfort and encouragement in the Revelation. So for the next month, during this Advent season, we're going to camp out here. We'll focus on the clear messages and not get too tripped up on the weird bits. And as we prepare ourselves to welcome Jesus into the world, we'll let the Revelation remind us that when Jesus comes into our world, it really is the End of the World... at least as we knew it.

Each week during Advent, Christians light a candle. Each candle represents a different aspect of the Christmas story, and the light represents our participation in the story. We're quite modern here, but the Advent wreath calls back to the days before electricity - if you were waiting very long for something, you had to light a lamp. The Advent candles remind us not to "fall asleep" as we wait for Jesus, to be intentional in this season of Advent. Each week, a different family in our church will turn on the Advent candle for this week, tell us what the candle represents and then read some scripture telling that part of the Advent story. This week, would you welcome:

SERMON TEXT

Over the last 100 years, our cultural attitude towards the End of the World has taken a fascinating shift. At the end of the 1800s and up until about 1915 or so, most Americans thought Jesus was coming back any day. The number of rapture predictions and End Times scenarios was staggering. And even those who weren't Christians were predicting that the 20th century would be the new golden age of humanity.

Of course the 1900s didn't go that way - instead it was a century of endless war, crushing world-wide depression and devastating new technologies like nuclear, chemical and bio-weaponry.

Today, we don't look forward to the Second Coming. In fact, if you look around at our popular culture, it's safe to say we're downright *terrified* at the idea of the End of the World. How many people do you know who are a little bit worried that those Mayans might be right about December 21? End of the World movies have always been popular, but in the last few years, we've seen a higher percentage of them than ever. Two of the most popular shows on TV right now are *The Walking Dead* and *Revolution*, both of which ask, What would happen if we lost everything?

That's really the question the End of the World makes us ask: What if we lost everything? What if it all just went away? Or worse, what if it was all *taken* away?

Those are scary questions to ask, especially around this time of year. Because for many in our culture, Christmas can end up being all about stuff. More stuff. New stuff. Buying the right stuff. Maybe you can't relate to this, but Christmas can bring out the worst in me.

The Christmas of my sophomore year in high school, I was 16. My dad had just gotten remarried and we were celebrating our first Christmas with my stepmom (whom I love).

A bit of background to this story: I grew up in Kansas City, MO. And back in the 90s, their football team was actually really good. If you lived in Kansas City, you were a Chiefs fan - KC fans are some of the most rabid in the country.

I was then and still am a Pittsburgh Steelers fan. I was born outside Pittsburgh, and they're the best team in the NFL (at least when their whole bench isn't injured). If you live in Kansas City and you're *not* a Chiefs fan, you take a lot of abuse, and my whole family are diehard Chiefs fans.

My new step-grandma had sent with my stepmom presents for all us new grandkids. So there we are, Christmas morning, opening up our gifts, enjoying all the new stuff we're getting. And I open my gift from step-grandma.

It was a Kansas City Chiefs blanket.

My entire family immediately started catcalling and teasing me, and I got mad. I threw the blanket down and spat, "I refuse to accept this gift."

Now, thank God my step-grandma wasn't there to witness my tantrum. I only got to be embarrassed in front of my dad, stepmom and siblings. But I can tell you that, once the anger of the moment passed, I felt awful about my reaction.

My step-grandma didn't know me at all. I'd met her once. And she gave me a very kind gift, that for 99.5% of everyone else living in KC would've been perfect. She didn't give me the gift to tease me or to try to convert me to being a Chiefs fan or any other silly reason. It was a gift of love, of welcome into her family.

But I was so wrapped up in myself, in protecting my own identity as the LONE STEELERS FAN that I couldn't see the gift for what it was, I couldn't receive it in the spirit of love in which it was given.

Even now when I tell that story, I'm ashamed of myself. Ashamed of how I acted. Ashamed of what I turned the beautiful act of gift-giving into something ugly.

But that's the thing about Christmas. For all its, there's that real ugliness, too. Anyone else notice how quickly and seamlessly the beautiful act of giving a gift someone else would like can transform into an ugly quest to be the perfect present giver? For everyone who truly loves spending time with their families, how many of us experience pain, tension and loss at this time of year, too? And if your schedule is anything like mine, you're busier this time of year than any other. Between endless

Christmas parties and traveling to celebrate with friends and family and rushing around to find all those perfect presents, a quiet night at home may just have to wait until January.

Maybe it's good that New Years Resolution time is so close to Christmas! We can nearly kill ourselves at the end of this year with stress and business and spending, then turn around and promise to be better next year.

Of course, Jesus offers us a better way than that. In fact, Jesus never wanted our Christmas celebrations to become something that's all about me and my identity. He didn't come so I could throw tantrums.

This conflict over identity is at the core of the Christmas story in Matthew. It's an aspect of Christmas we often overlook because it's not part of the Nativity Scene, but let's take a look, beginning in chapter 2:

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the reign of King Herod. About that time some wise men from eastern lands arrived in Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose, and we have come to worship him."

Here's an example of our nativity scenes not doing us justice: they present the shepherds and wise men all at the manger at once. But a close reading of this story shows us that they actually showed up when Jesus was about two. The word translated as "wise men" is actually *magos*, where we get our word "magician". These guys were astrologers. And the night Jesus was born, the stars told them something important had happened, that a new king of the Jews had been born.

So they got together an entourage – probably around a hundred people – and set out from where they were (probably Persia). Why some “Christian” business hasn’t made a fortune selling “biblical” nativity scenes with 100 wise men yet is beyond me. Anyway, we always have this image of them following a moving star that stopped over the stable, but that's not what "the star" was about. All they knew was that a new King of Israel had been born.

So *naturally* where did they go? To the palace in Jerusalem. To Herod, the King of Israel.

We call Herod "Herod the Great", and he was an amazing builder. But he was also "Herod the Paranoid" and "Herod the Ruthless". Herod wasn't actually Jewish. He didn't have a legitimate claim to Israel's throne. The only reason he was king was because he'd made a deal with Caesar Augustus. So his power relied on being able to maintain a balance between keeping Rome happy and keeping the Jewish people happy, or at least not unhappy enough to revolt. But the Jewish people *hated* Herod. He was an imposter, a pretender to the throne.

As a result, Herod was constantly trying to protect his throne. He killed a wife and son because he heard a rumor they might oppose him. He relentlessly eliminated anyone who might challenge his throne even a little bit.

So imagine you're Herod. And this massive entourage of Persian nobles and magicians shows up at your palace. And they say, Hey! We heard the good news!

--What good news?

About the new king who was born! That's so great! We've come to worship him! Where is he?

You understand the Magi's confusion. Where else would you look for the King of Israel but in the palace in Jerusalem.

But Herod, of course, had not heard about Jesus' birth. He hadn't heard that a new king was in town, the true king. Was he excited? No. In fact, Matthew tells us:

King Herod was deeply disturbed when he heard this, as was everyone in Jerusalem. -- Matthew 2:1-3

Of course Herod was disturbed. A new king meant he wasn't king anymore. And since Herod was a pretend king to begin with... Jesus represented a challenge to his identity. So how did Herod respond?

"He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law and asked, "Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?"

"In Bethlehem in Judea," they said, "for this is what the prophet wrote..."

Then Herod called for a private meeting with the wise men, and he learned from them the time when the star first appeared. Then he told them, "Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so that I can go and worship him, too!" -- Matthew 2:4-8 (NLT)

The wise men are no dummies, and God warns them Herod is up to no good. So they skip the palace on the way back:

Herod was furious when he realized that the wise men had outwitted him. He sent soldiers to kill all the boys in and around Bethlehem who were two years old and under, based on the wise men's report of the star's first appearance. -- Matthew 2:16 (NLT)

Herod was so threatened by Jesus' coming that he committed infanticide. He was willing to kill rather than change, acknowledge Jesus' kingship.

Believe it or not, this same question of identity is what the book of Revelation is about, and we see it clearly in Revelation 4. The Revelation was written to Christians living in the Roman Empire at the end of the first century, a couple of generations after Jesus' death and resurrection. Nearly a century after the first Christmas.

Their part of the world was under the thumb of the Roman Caesars. [Roma pic] Every part of their worlds - their jobs, their culture - proclaimed that Caesar is King, that Caesar is on the Throne. Rome taught everyone they ruled that the world literally revolved around Rome. They often pictured the goddess Roma on a throne at the center of everything. And Christians who didn't agree with that message, who challenged Rome's proclaimed identity, didn't fare very well.

So John's goal in the Revelation is to pull back the curtain of reality. Chapter 4 is like that scene at the end of the Wizard of Oz, where Toto pulls back the curtain to reveal that Oz the Great and Powerful is really a sad little old man [pic?]. At the beginning of chapter 4, John is taken up into

Heaven and shown the throne of the universe - think of it as the control room for the universe. And – spoiler alert! – Rome's not actually on the Throne. God is.

Now, as we read this, a tip: you could spend hundreds of hours trying to figure out all the symbolic detail. This is a rich book. And if you want to do that, it's a lot of fun. But today, we're going to focus only on the big picture. So sit back and just try to take it all in. Let's take a look at what John sees:

I saw a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it. The one sitting on the throne was as brilliant as gemstones-- like jasper and carnelian. And the glow of an emerald circled his throne like a rainbow.

Twenty-four thrones surrounded him, and twenty-four elders sat on them. They were all clothed in white and had gold crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning and the rumble of thunder. And in front of the throne were seven torches with burning flames. This is the sevenfold Spirit of God. In front of the throne was a shiny sea of glass, sparkling like crystal.

In the center and around the throne were four living beings, each covered with eyes, front and back. The first of these living beings was like a lion; the second was like an ox; the third had a human face; and the fourth was like an eagle in flight. Each of these living beings had six wings, and their wings were covered all over with eyes, inside and out.

There's a lot to take in there, but overall, we're seeing God on the Throne of the universe, surrounded by power and awesomeness. You can imagine the sight taking your breath away, being forced to pause because you're awestruck.

The 24 elders represent the people of God and the 4 creatures represent the created order, all the animals. I know that's not immediately evident, but if you work through all the symbols and Old Testament references and all that, commentators and scholars throughout the history of the Church are pretty unanimous about all that.

And as interesting as all those details are, what really matters is that in this vision of the Throne Room, we're seeing the world as it should be. This is God's will being done in Heaven, where all creation is worshiping before God's throne. John goes on:

Day after day and night after night they keep on saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty-- the one who always was, who is, and who is still to come."

Whenever the living beings give glory and honor and thanks to the one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever), the twenty-four elders fall down and worship the one sitting on the throne (the one who lives forever and ever). And they lay their crowns before the throne and say, "You are worthy, O Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power. For you created all things, and they exist because you created what you pleased." -- Revelation 4:2-11 (NLT)

Day after day, all the time (we might say 24/7), creation is worshiping the true king of the world. And the Elders do something fascinating: They're all wearing these crowns, and when they worship, they take the crowns off and lay them at God's feet.

Now, when we hear the word crown, we immediately think of a king. Crowns for us represent ruling, power, authority. But the ancient world had two kinds of crowns. The kind kings wore was called a diadem. But they had this other kind of crown made out of olive branches woven together. It was given to people who had accomplished something great - like winning an olympic game or performing some important task. This kind of crown was called a *stephanos* more like a gold medal or the key to the city is today. [crowns pic]

And the elders were laying down *stephanos* crowns. They were laying down their achievements. Their talents. What they did well. Their identities.

Revelation tells us the right response to a Revelation of God is to get off your throne and lay your identity at God's feet.

Compare the Elders' response to God's presence with Herod's. The Elders worship, falling on their faces and offering up their achievements to God. Herod was troubled. And if you know the Christmas story, you know that Herod tried to kill Jesus.

Herod could've responded like the Elders. He could've celebrated the many achievements in his kingship. He could've offered the fruit of his reign to Jesus much as the Magi did. But instead, he reacted out of fear and scarcity. The beginning of Jesus' kingship meant the end of his. So he lashed out.

How often do we see that sort of lashing out during this season? Whether it's the insanity of Black Friday, parents fighting over toys in the stores, family fights, or lashing out at someone for an ill-received gift. We see the fruit of Herod's Christmas all around us.

Herod's fear was that same sort of End-of-the-World Fear we see around us these days. He constantly feared what would happen if it all went away. If his identity as King was compromised. Herod's identity was so wrapped up in his stuff, in his achievements, in what he'd built for himself, that he couldn't imagine life without it. He'd would do - he did do - anything to protect it all.

We are certainly not as evil as Herod, but in his story we see our own struggle for identity magnified. We too build our identity around our achievements, our accomplishments. We too are invested in the lives we're building for ourselves. This season gets so busy that we don't put much thought into *how* we're living Christmas. We just go on autopilot. We don't stop to ask, Who is my king right now? Is it me? My kids? The credit card companies I'm going in debt to? My schedule?

Or is it Jesus?

There's a line between receiving a blanket as a loving gift and perceiving it as an attack on my identity.

There's a line between giving a gift because I'm sharing a part of myself with someone I love and giving to get love, to be the best kid/parent/friend/secret santa.

There's a line between spending time with those I love and appreciate this holiday season and running from place to place putting in appearances and maintain a reputation.

There's a line between being generous within my means and going into unsustainable debt.

On one side of the line is Herod clinging to his throne. On the other is giving up our identities for the sake of Jesus.

So are you following the way of Herod? Or the way of Jesus?

That's a vital question to ask as we move into this Christmas season. Because we're at the beginning. We're looking down the line at a season that will either be life-giving or life-taking.

And Jesus came into this world to put an End to the Herod Christmases. He came to show us who the true king is, the true way of the world.

And that is not in propping up our identities. Of worrying "What happens if it all goes away?"

Communion Set-up

Today, and each week during Advent, we have the opportunity to feast together, to celebrate the Communion Meal. This table is a Revelation of Jesus. This is the table where we remember that Jesus gave up everything for us. Our king loved us so much that first he gave up heaven to come among us. Then he gave up even his own life, his own identity, his own Self for us. We eat bread to remember his body broken by a King who wasn't willing to give up his kingdom. We drink grape juice to remember his blood poured out for that same King, and for all of us would-be Caesars, all of us pretenders to the throne of the universe. So how do we respond? As Herod or the Magi? As Caesar or the Elders?

To all us Caesars and Herods, Jesus says, Come to my table. Eat my flesh and drink my blood. Bring your achievements, your accomplishments. Bring the lives that you've built and lay them at my feet. Because it's only when you are here, eating from my table, kneeling at my throne, that you'll find the life that is truly life.

To come to this table is the End of the World as you know it. But it's also the beginning of something much better, much bigger. And that's what Christmas is really all about.

Let's pray together.

Benediction

Advent Reader

After Party

Herods and Caesars are right to fear Jesus' coming. Because Jesus' kingship means the end of theirs. But Magi and Elders welcome Jesus. They don't cling too tightly to their identities. They know that the life Jesus offers is much better than anything their stuff could offer them.