

## Welcome

There are only three places in the Holy Land we're pretty confident are the real, historical locations they claim to be. One is Jesus' empty tomb. Another is the Apostle Peter's house in Capernaum. And the third is the Church of the Nativity, built over the spot marking the first Christmas.

It's a huge hassle to get there: Bethlehem is in Palestine, so you can't take a cab from Jerusalem to the Church of the Nativity. You have to go to the Wall Israel built, then go through intense security, then get *another* cab on the other side that will take you to Nativity square. Then you wait in a huge line, filing one-by-one for sometimes hours through the enormous, ancient church building until you reach a staircase that descends into a cellar.

The staircase and the cellar are packed with pilgrims all waiting for a chance to venerate the very place where Jesus was born. A golden star in the middle of a white tile floor marks that place, and the star has a hole in the middle, where you can get down on your knees, reach through, and touch the floor of the cave where Mary gave birth.

In theory, it sounds pretty amazing.

In practice, it's pure insanity. The pilgrims are a mass of bodies from all over the world, with any number of hygiene standards. Everyone is cranky from waiting in line, dealing with customs and cabbies and in a hurry to get to other holy sites. The basement itself is a small chamber, and pretty claustrophobic even for those who don't mind tight spaces.

And when you're on your knees, reaching into that hole, you get about 15 seconds before people start yelling at you to move on.

Not so special. Pretty stressful, actually.

Maybe it's no coincidence that the site of the first Christmas so closely mirrors our Christmas celebrations. In theory, Christmas is a beautiful thing. Peace on Earth, Good Will towards all people.

But in practice, now that Thanksgiving is in the dust and kids are counting down days till Christmas break, we're feeling the chaos of the season. Whether it's the increasingly ridiculous holiday wars or the shopping trips to the overcrowded malls or endless holiday activities and parties to planning and preparing those family gift exchanges, it's hard to remember Jesus in all the hustle.

It's entirely possible to be very busy preparing for Christmas, but fail completely to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ.

And if we're being honest, we can't expect the chaos of Christmas culture is going away anytime soon. So what do we do? How can we be sure that in preparing for Christmas, we don't miss the heart of the season, which is Christ coming to us?

We're going to talk today about how to prepare for Christ's coming today, on Christmas and every day. Because God is present with us in every chaotic moment, so we can choose to be with God, to transform not our circumstances but ourselves, such that we become God's presence this season.

### **Series**

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. It's New Year's Day for the Christian Calendar. The Church year begins that that period when God's people were waiting for the Messiah. We just finished a series on the book of Lamentations, a series in which we explored the people of God's response to a cultural devastation - the Exile.

Lamentations ended with hope: hope that tragedy was not the end, hope that God would come to God's people once again.

Then God's people waited for more than 500 years for God to come in that event we now call Christmas.

Advent is the season of the Church year where we wait with our spiritual ancestors for God to come. Advent, then, is a season of hope. It's the season where we declare that tragedy and pain are not the end, where we stand up and celebrate that what is ahead of us is life and light and hope.

Advent is the conviction not that things are okay, but that things are going to be okay. It's the insistence that though the world is dark, light is coming into the world, that the glow on the horizon is not a trick of the eye, but the dawn of a new day.

In light of that hope, our Advent series this year is called To Be Continued. We're remembering that after the Exile, Israel's story wasn't finished... it was continued in that first Christmas event.

We'll be listening to the prophets who lived after the Exile, who helped Israel learn how to hope and expect that God would return to them.

In the same way, our story is not finished either. We know that God came to us on that first Christmas, but that wasn't the end of the story. We know God will come again, to establish peace and justice once and for all. So just like our ancient ancestors, we too are waiting for God, hoping for God's return.

So we'll also listen to Jesus as he taught about his return. We'll learn what shape our hope should take so that, as we approach the Christmas celebration, we can be united with God, present as God is present in all we do this holiday season.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Isaiah 64. This passage was written after the destruction of Jerusalem, when God's people were devastated and aching for God to return to them.

They have journeyed with the prophet Jeremiah through the process of Lamentation. They know the Exile was a result of their sin. They are repentant and hopeful. Now they are hoping for God to move, to come, to rescue and restore them. Listen to their words:

Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!  
How the mountains would quake in your presence!  
As fire causes wood to burn  
and water to boil,  
your coming would make the nations tremble.  
Then your enemies would learn the reason for your fame!  
When you came down long ago,  
you did awesome deeds beyond our highest expectations.  
And oh, how the mountains quaked!  
For since the world began,  
no ear has heard  
and no eye has seen a God like you,  
who works for those who wait for him!  
You welcome those who gladly do good,  
who follow godly ways.  
But you have been very angry with us,  
for we are not godly.  
We are constant sinners;  
how can people like us be saved?  
We are all infected and impure with sin.  
When we display our righteous deeds,  
they are nothing but filthy rags.  
Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall,  
and our sins sweep us away like the wind.  
Yet no one calls on your name  
or pleads with you for mercy.  
Therefore, you have turned away from us  
and turned us over to our sins. -- Isaiah 64:1-7

The prophet knows that God is absent because of their sins. But having repented of their sin, having turned back to God, the prophet cries out, "Oh that you would burst from the Heavens!"

He goes on to recount how back in the day, God did all kinds of miraculous events that made nations tremble. He's asking now for God to do that same kind of stuff again. Show up and wow us with your power and glory! Show up and save us in the most dramatic fashion possible!

This is the God-as-Superman hope. We want God to be present with us in big, showy, flashy ways. Or at least *obvious* ways.

We can get on board with that. Maybe this will be the year God bursts from Heaven to establish peace on Earth. Maybe God will take care of ISIS and the conflict in Syria and take care of the refugee crisis and fix immigration and heal everyone so Healthcare isn't such an issue and bring justice to all the abusers who are still in power and fix education and... you know, all that stuff it takes a superhero to do.

For those of us under the crush of holiday chaos, we're not necessarily looking for God to tear open the skies, but it would be nice for God to email us a to-do list. Here're the parties you have to go to, here're the ones to stay away from. And I took the liberty of finishing your Christmas shopping; it'll all be delivered, pre-wrapped, and set under the tree for you. And I rewired all your relatives' brains so they all agree with you and the Christmas dinner feasts will be 700% less awkward this year.

It sounds nice, doesn't it? Impossible, miraculous, but really, really nice.

Here's the problem though: we know that when God did come, it didn't happen like that. The heavens weren't split. God came as a baby, born in a backwater town to poor parents. And nearly no one even knew he'd come.

When God comes, it's nearly never this sort of 'bursting from Heaven' the prophet begged for. When God was among us in the flesh, how did he teach us to live in this world of chaos and confusion?

[Scripture Slide 2] Turn to Mark 13. This is during Holy Week, the last week of Jesus' life. His followers have arrived in Jerusalem with him expecting a new Exodus. They expect Jesus to tear open the skies, for the armies of Heaven to burst forth and conquer the Romans. They expect a Superman Messiah. And they wanted to know WHEN to expect all these things. Here's what Jesus says:

"No one knows the day or hour when these things will happen, not even the angels in heaven or the Son himself. Only the Father knows. And since you don't know when that time will come, be on guard! Stay alert!

"The coming of the Son of Man can be illustrated by the story of a man going on a long trip. When he left home, he gave each of his slaves instructions about the work they were to do, and he told the gatekeeper to watch for his return. You, too, must keep watch! For you don't know when the master of the household will return—in the evening, at midnight, before dawn, or at daybreak.

Don't let him find you sleeping when he arrives without warning. I say to you what I say to everyone: Watch for him!" -- Mark 13:32-37

Jesus says, "Yes, God is coming. That day you want will arrive. But you don't know when it will get her. The angels don't know and *even Jesus himself doesn't know.*"

So what are we supposed to do?

Watch for him. Don't sleep. Be prepared.

You might not be getting much sleep this Christmas season, but we must remember that being busy is not the same as being prepared. We can spend so much time getting ready for Christmas that we miss Christ.

Another commentator said it like this: We've changed from a people who want to BE good to a people who want to FEEL good.

But God calls us to BE a good people. A people who embody God's way always - especially, perhaps, in the Christmas season. We can do so many things to try to feel good, to try to capture the spirit of the holidays, that we fail to BE good. We fail to be present with our families, with our friends. We fail to be God's image in our workplaces, at our holiday parties. We overlook the vulnerable.

Like hypnotism, our busyness lulls us to sleep. We end up on holiday autopilot. But Jesus challenges us to wake up, to be attentive to what's going on around us. Because, even when it feels like the sky is falling (and it always feels like it's falling for someone), even when the chaos of life is pressing in around us, God is with us, God is working.

But we miss that if we're looking to Heaven, expecting God to swoop in like Superman. So the prophet invites us to look for God not in the spectacular, but in the ordinary. He says:

And yet, O LORD, you are our Father.

We are the clay, and you are the potter.

We all are formed by your hand.

Don't be so angry with us, LORD.

Please don't remember our sins forever.

Look at us, we pray, and see that we are all your people. -- Isaiah 64:8-9

God is a parent to us. God is an artist, shaping and molding us.

God is not changing our circumstances, but our character. God is molding US.

To be awake, to be alert, is to be attentive to God's work in our lives.

When I visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, I knew we weren't going to get any special treatment. I knew we'd have to endure the press of bodies, the lines. I knew I'd have only a few moments at the place where the manger once stood, where Heaven and Earth met.

So as we journeyed to Bethlehem, I prepared. I read the Christmas story from Luke (the one with the angels and shepherds). I prepared a brief prayer I would be ready to recite in that moment.

I had never been to the Church of the Nativity, so I didn't know exactly what to expect, but I did find that, having prepared myself, the lines and crowds and body odor were less annoying. And those brief moments I spent in prayer with my hand on the floor of the Nativity cave were profound even though they were brief.

I couldn't change *what* I experienced in Bethlehem, but I could control *how* I experienced it. Because I took time to prepare.

So too, friends, you cannot control much of what this Christmas season will throw at you. But you can control *how* you experience it. Because God is a parent, leading you. God is an artist, shaping and molding you. If you will be open to God.

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] asdf

1. When in the last week have I been attentive to God's work in my life?
2. When have I allowed busyness and circumstance to drown out God's voice?
3. How in the next week might I be too busy to pay attention to God?
4. How can I make myself available to God's work in my life this week?

### **Assignment + Blessing**

[Meditation Card] "I am the clay and you are the potter. I am formed by your hand. -- Isaiah 64:8"