

It is December 9<sup>th</sup> and we are half way through the Christmas season? Does anyone need a nap? Do you have time for a nap? Are you already thinking of the gifts you still need? Or have you even started?

Christmas as a mom is extremely stressful to make everyone happy. Did I check everything off my to-do list? Did I get all the gifts I needed to buy? What parties are we able to go to? Did the kids find the Elf? Where did he or she hide last night? I ran out of wrapping paper and tape and have only a few presents to wrap? Checking my Amazon account for the delivery time of a gift before we leave out of town. Have we decided which family members we are spending Christmas with and then when is our “other” Christmas? Are we all packed and ready to travel? I missed a day of the Advent Calendar!! Oh no!! We need to color, cut and paste the cow, horse and lamb to the Nativity season or eat four “days” of candy! Do you suffer from OPD?? Ornament Placement Disorder!!! I know I do and all the ornaments have to fit just right on the tree; not too many Christmas balls on one side, that candy cane is not proportional with the rest!! OPD is a real thing people, I have it!!

I took a poll recently of the real people, you know my Facebook friends because those are the real people I know and who better to ask about their holidays than the people I trust. I wanted to see what their favorite and least favorite part of the holidays were. Well, their answers were no different than the ones I have seen over the years. Stress of money, divorced families, ungrateful people, having to travel long distances to see family, the weather, not living up to what someone wanted, the commercialism of the holidays, loneliness. And what was even more surprising is there were more negative comments or posts than positive ones; by more than fifty percent! That was the shocking part. We don’t find the happy or the merry or the blessings in the Christmas season, just the bad!

What are we missing? Christmas is supposed to be about Christ coming into the world - about peace on earth and good news to all people. But somehow in our culture, we’ve turned preparation for Christmas into a circus that creates chaos instead of peace. Where did we go wrong?

Today, we’re going to get back to the roots of Advent, clear away some of the holiday clutter and rediscover the Christ at the heart of Christmas. He is our rock, our island of joy in the sad. Christ is our peace in the chaos. Christ is our grateful in the hate. Today, we hear God call out to us “Comfort! Comfort!” If you could use a little comfort, a little good news right now, stand up and sing with us as we prepare for the coming of Jesus.

Today is the second Sunday of Advent - Advent is the season that begins the Church Year. We begin in that period when God's people were waiting for the Messiah. We just finished a series on the book of Lamentations, a series<sup>4</sup> 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] First, let's journey to Jerusalem after the Exile. Turn with me to Isaiah 40. In this passage, the prophet is speaking to a people who have been devastated but - as we saw in our last series - are beginning to hope again. To a people who are just beginning to rebuild their lives, who still live in ruins and among chaos, the prophet's first words are "Comfort, comfort!"

Isaiah 40:1-5

"Comfort, comfort my people,"  
says your God.

<sup>2</sup>“Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.  
 Tell her that her sad days are gone  
 and her sins are pardoned.  
 Yes, the Lord has punished her twice over  
 for all her sins.”

<sup>3</sup>Listen! It’s the voice of someone shouting,  
 “Clear the way through the wilderness  
 for the Lord!  
 Make a straight highway through the wasteland  
 for our God!

<sup>4</sup>Fill in the valleys,  
 and level the mountains and hills.  
 Straighten the curves,  
 and smooth out the rough places.

<sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,  
 and all people will see it together.  
 The Lord has spoken!”<sup>[a]</sup>

The prophet is speaking to the people that have suffered and waited for 500 years for the coming of the Lord. They have suffered, watched their ancestors suffer and die, risked their lives for food, clothing, safety and it has never come.

These words come with hope and comfort that better days are here to come! God is coming to them! Their Exile will be ending. But they have a part to play. The prophet doesn’t expect them to sit on their hands and just wait for God to show up. No, he offers a challenge, a job. He calls them to action: “Clear the way through the wilderness for the Lord! Make a straight highway through the wasteland for our God!” For people living in Jerusalem 500 years before Jesus was born, making a highway in the wilderness was no easy task. The area they are being asked to make a straight and clear highway was full of rough terrain. Mountains, rocks, valleys, steep cliffs and rocks. Building a highway there today would be no easy task, let alone back then. And yet, this is the prophet’s call. And he calls it a *comfort*.

Think about when a loved one you haven’t seen in a long time is coming in from out of town to visit. Are you excited? Do you feel anxious, joyful preparing for their coming because time has passed since you saw them? Maybe you have a loved one coming to town this holiday. Would it make a difference if you had to pick them up from the DFW airport during the holiday season at rush hour, not knowing their airline, in the rain, there is an accident, you are almost out of gas and you have kids in the car? Are you still excited about this trip? You aren’t excited about the actually physical trip or what you have to go through to get there, but you love this person.

You've been *anticipating* their return for a long time. It doesn't cross your mind for a second to just let them get an Uber from the airport.

No, you do whatever you need to do to Make a Way, to get there, to stand at the Exit so the moment you see your loved one, see their smile, hug them and get to be in one another's physical presence. The arrival (or ADVENT) of your loved one makes the trip all worth it.

God's people were hopeful. They had been waiting for the Lord to come, to rescue them from their pain and sorrow they had felt for far too long. And now they receive the word: the Lord is coming to us!! Make a highway!

[Scripture Slide 2] Advent is our season to prepare for Christ's coming. It's our chance to put ourselves in the lives of those ancient mothers and fathers and ask, "Am I preparing for Christ to be in my life?" Or, in the language of the prophet, "How do we make this straight highway for the Lord in our modern day lives?"

Because even though Jesus has come, our story isn't finished. So now turn with me over to Mark 1. Mark's gospel doesn't have the Christmas story we typically think of - with baby Jesus and the shepherds and magic. Mark begins with another prophet - John the Baptist.

Have you ever been walking in town and see a street preacher on the corner firing away hell and brimstone? Those Bible-beating, get in your face, spreading the gospel of the Lord through their evangelism. How did they make you feel? Were you uncomfortable? Did you try not to make eye contact with this bull horn street preacher in fear of having to talk to them?

Well this was John the Baptist, he was a weird dude! He would stand on the edge of town wearing a camel robe shouting about the Lord! You'll notice as we read the first few verses of Mark's story of Jesus that he uses Isaiah's prophecy.

This is the Good News about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. It began just as the prophet Isaiah had written:

"Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
and he will prepare your way.  
He is a voice shouting in the wilderness,  
'Prepare the way for the Lord's coming!  
Clear the road for him!'"

This messenger was John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness and preached that people should be baptized to show that they had repented of their sins and turned to God to be forgiven. -- Mark 1:1-4

So you have one of those crazed street preachers, standing in the desert, and shouting at everyone to ‘Repent, repent!’ And when Mark tells the story, he uses that Isaiah prophecy, which was all about “Comfort! Comfort!”

I don’t know about you but ‘comfort’ is the last thing I feel when I see one of those street preachers. But Mark thinks that John’s message - repent of your sin! - is a message of comfort and hope. He sees John’s activity - inviting people to repent and calling them to be baptized - as how God’s people make the highway for God to come to us.

John’s message is comfort for everyone. He is telling the people to prepare the way for the Lord! Clear the road for him! John is bringing hope to these people that have been suffering for 500 years: hope that their lives will get better because God is coming among them. But they have work to do: they must repent of their sins and look to God to be forgiven.

God does not want us to physically get out his shovels and picks to make a highway for Him, he is everywhere He needs to be. He wants us to dig into our hearts, repentant, ask for forgiveness, offer forgiveness to others, show our hearts to others, and reflect God’s love in all we do. This seems hard to do though during this busy time of year when nothing is slowing down, let alone making time to reflect on ourselves and give back even more to those around us.

But the question remains: what DO we need to repent of? What are the mountains and valleys in our lives that are keeping us from God? What parts of our lives have become twisted that need to be made straight again? What part did you have in all of this preparation and stress? What are you bringing to the table? Have you lost patience with a loved one? Missed an obligation? Had road rage? Gotten mad waiting for a person at the grocery store, been frustrated and taken your frustration out on a coworker?

Making a straight highway and going through the valleys and over the mountains.... We are the ones with mountains, peaks and valleys-examples of our sins, jealousy of others, stresses of the holiday season-He is the straight path to finding the way to grace, light and fulfillment in our lives.

Building a highway through a mountainous desert is HARD work!! So too is the work of preparing ourselves for Christ’s coming. But if we don’t make the road, how will God come? If we don’t prepare ourselves to receive Christ in our lives, in our relationships, in our families, in

our church, in our vocations, this Christmas, then how can we expect to receive Christ in his coming?

The easy thing to do now would be to hand out a list or a schedule, to tell you what you need to do to repent and prepare for God this Advent season. But I can't tell you what your preparation looks like. And what preparing for Christ looks like in your life will not necessarily be what it looks like in mine.

Discovering what gets between you and God is a work of discernment. It takes some time to sit in prayer or conversation with someone you trust. Could you take 10 minutes a few days this week in your busy schedule to sit with God? To make some time for God and you and ask, What gets between God and you?

If we don't make the road; get rid of our boulders, rocks and debris, how will God come? What is coming between you and God to make room for him? What is your roadblock or detour? If preparing is making the way then what needs to go? What do you need to unload to build a straight path for God to come into your life and heart? What needs to be reshaped? Sometimes we don't make time or room for what needs to be worked on; ourselves. We say yes to too many things, spread ourselves too thin during the holidays to please others. But are we pleasing them or just making it harder on us? What was truly gained from giving more time, buying a more expensive gift, comparing your holiday to others, yourself to others, what you do for others? It is entirely plausible that we do so much preparing for Christmas that we miss the reason we are preparing to celebrate in the first place.

John and Isaiah's good news is God is coming and we are making a path for God to come to us! What are we doing to make those roads straight and leveling the mountains during this holiday season?

Just a few weeks ago we celebrated another holiday Thanksgiving. My husband and mother in law spent hours that day preparing and even the days before making sure we had a delicious meal that arrived on the table warm all at the time we were set to eat. Our family works really hard for this meal to celebrate what we are thankful for, We sat at the table after just a thirty minute meal with hours of dishes to wash and wondered was it all worth it. The thirty minute meal is not worth it; all of the time spent before is worth it! My son loves to be his daddy's sous chef in the kitchen. He spent time helping daddy by getting ingredients out of the refrigerator and asking lots of questions. My husband and his mother chat back and forth for a few weeks about what each would prepare and bring. We spent the day together as a family in my mother in law's kitchen working and preparing the meal, being present with each other. Enjoying exactly what we were thankful for, each other. The act of preparing itself became an act of presence.

As we prepare for God to come by repenting, by ordering our lives, but clearing away what doesn't need to be there, by finding the time; we find that God is already with us. The preparation itself is an act of presence.

What would the Christmas season look like without God? Can you imagine? No, ceramic baby Jesus, no Christmas tree with the star on top leading the wise men to Jerusalem, no Advent chocolate calendar to countdown the day to Jesus' birthday, no Silent Night or Christmas hymns or the lightening of the candles.

Is it possible that while busy getting ready for Christmas that you are missing the reason we are preparing for Christmas? How are you preparing for Christ this Advent season? It is not able how many times you can say "Merry Christmas" at the checkout or what best deal you got standing in line for Black Friday or how much money you spent on your boss' gift this year.

No, we prepare by preparing *ourselves*. We prepare by examining our own lives through the lens of God's call on us. We level the mountains and raise the valleys. We straighten out what is crooked. We get ourselves ready for God to come.

Oh the lights fade, the wrapping paper is torn, the bows not as pretty. We work for days, weeks, maybe even months preparing for Christmas and then in one more wrapping paper pile and leftover Christmas ham it is over and the excitement has worn off. This is why our season of preparation matters. Our goal is not to have the best hour of present-opening on Christmas morning. It's to be God's people in the world all year long. To be a source of joy, hope and peace on Christmas morning and New Year's Day and Groundhog Day and Fourth of July...all the way back to Thanksgiving when we start it all over again. We should be like the child that can't go to sleep waiting for Santa to come down the chimney and what will be under the tree the next morning! Or the faces of our loved ones when we get them the thoughtful gift we knew they would love and cherish. Preparing for Jesus' birth reminds us that God is not done with the world. God came once; God will come again. And we should always be preparing for God to return.

What are the mountains in your life, the unnecessary burdens you carry? What are the valleys, the dark places where the light of God's truth doesn't shine? What's crooked in your life that needs to be made straight? Friends, Christmas means God is coming to dwell with us. With all of the chaos of the holiday season, we forget to watch for the light of the Lord! God is always with us. He is present, all day, every day! How are you preparing to welcome God with us?

### **Communion + Examen**

[Communion Slide] We come to the communion table this morning to remember that our Advent journey is possible only because God is already with us. This table invites us to share the meal

Jesus ate with his followers the night before he was killed. During that meal, he broke bread and gave it to us. He said, “This bread is my body, broken for you. Eat it and remember me.” Later in the meal, he passed us a cup of wine. He said, “This wine is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Drink it and remember me.”

By receiving the communion meal, we recognize that we only make a way for God in our lives because God has already made a way to us and for us. We participate in Jesus’ death so that we might be united with God.

You don’t have to be a member of Catalyst to receive Communion this morning. If you are willing to prepare yourself for God’s coming this Christmas, if you’re willing to repent of your sin, to clear your life of what’s between you and God, then you’re welcome to come to the table this morning.

Before we receive communion together, I’m going to lead you in a Prayer of Examen. I’m going to ask you four questions to help you reflect on your response to the message today. After you’ve had time to reflect prayerfully on each question, I’ll pray for us all and then as you’re ready, you can come forward to receive communion.

Here’s the first question:

1. When in the last week have I been attentive to God’s work in my life?
2. What has gotten between me and God in the last week?
3. What might get between me and God in the next week?
4. How can I prepare a way for God in my life this week?

Let’s pray:

God of Advent,

You have gathered us here today to remember that you are the God who comes to us. We have heard the voices of your prophets this morning, calling us to prepare ourselves for your coming. We confess that too often, we allow ourselves to be distracted from the work to which you call us in the world. We approach your table this morning to remember that you have come to us. We ask these wafers and juice become a spiritual food for us. Open our eyes to the things in our lives that need to go. Open our ears to the voices we need to quit ignoring. Remind us again that we prepare a path for you to come into our lives only because you have already come among us and are working alongside us.

We offer these prayers and approach your table in the name of your son, Jesus.

### **Assignment**