

Welcome

When I was a kid, we had some pretty specific Christmas traditions: on Christmas Eve, we would go to Blockbuster and each of us three kids would get to pick out one movie. Then we would all go home. My dad would make CORN DIP and my mom would make CHRISTMAS SURPRISE DRINK - a feast we only got on Christmas Eve. We'd watch each of our movies and one-by-one drift off to sleep. Our parents would put us to bed eventually and we'd wake up on Christmas morning, rushing out to the living room to see what Santa had brought us.

It was a great tradition... until my parents divorced.

Then we had two Christmases - which parent had us on Christmas changed every year. My parents tried to keep the traditions alive, but having Corn Dip twice in a week felt weird, and Dad didn't make Christmas Surprise Drink.

Our Christmas traditions changed.

They changed again when each of us kids moved out of the house, and again when we each got married. We learned the recipes for Corn Dip and Christmas Surprise Drink, so we can have them whenever we want.

These days, we more often do Christmas in July than anything else, and we have a whole new set of traditions: each of the kids gets a children's book. We read the Christmas story, and we read the kids' book. And maybe we sing Silent Night.

Today is Christmas Eve, and one thing is sure: no matter how traditional our traditions are, they change. The one constant in our world is change, and that goes for Christmas, too. We often face the reality of change with anger, fear or worry. We long for the good ole days, a simpler time. We're torn by the hustle and bustle of the holiday season. Maybe we have a new relationship or a new job with a new, less-holiday-friendly schedule. Maybe someone's not going to be by the tree this year like they once were. Maybe someone moved out, or welcomed a new life. Maybe things are looking up this Christmas and the only stress you have is the stress of change.

So today, whatever your Christmas traditions look like, no matter how old they are (even if they're brand new!), we're going to meet the Christ who is the eternal center of all those traditions. Today is about a Christmas that is for everyone, everywhere.

Message

Today is the final Sunday of Advent, which also this year happens to be Christmas Eve. Today is the day our waiting is over. Today is the day we welcome the Christ child into the world.

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 has been 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've heard from 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.

[Scripture Slide] Let's turn once more to Isaiah, to chapter 9. This prophecy was originally a celebration of the birth of King Hezekiah, who was one of Judah's greatest kings. But even Hezekiah was human, fallible. Some of his policies and decisions led directly to the Exile, that devastating cataclysm that led to the book of Lamentations (from our last series). So over the years, decades and centuries, God's people saw in this prophecy a hope that someone even greater than Hezekiah was coming - one who rule perfectly.

The people who walk in darkness
will see a great light.
For those who live in a land of deep darkness,
a light will shine.
You will enlarge the nation of Israel,
and its people will rejoice.
They will rejoice before you
as people rejoice at the harvest
and like warriors dividing the plunder.
For you will break the yoke of their slavery
and lift the heavy burden from their shoulders.
You will break the oppressor's rod,
just as you did when you destroyed the army of Midian.
The boots of the warrior
and the uniforms bloodstained by war
will all be burned.
They will be fuel for the fire.

For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.
The government will rest on his shoulders.
And he will be called:
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His government and its peace
will never end.
He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
for all eternity.
The passionate commitment of the LORD of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen! -- Isaiah 9:2-7

At the birth of this child, those who walk in darkness will see a great light. He would deliver the people from their long Exile, restore them to the freedom to which they were destined.

For many in Israel, this sounded like a return to the Good Ole Days. This promised child would be a king in the vein of Hezekiah, a king like mighty King David himself.

Of course, we know now that when Jesus came, it looked nothing like Hezekiah or David. Let's have Linus tell us the Christmas story from Luke's gospel:

[\[Peanuts Christmas Video\]](#)

Jesus, God made flesh, Israel's long awaited rescuing king, is born in the humblest of circumstances - not even in his own home, and among animals. The King of Israel is born not in a palace, surrounded by fanfare and nobility, but in a village no one could have cared less about. An angelic army announced his birth - but only to shepherds, whose report no one would believe.

None of the traditions surrounding the births of Israel's kings were observed here. This was something altogether new.

And Jesus' birth spawned dozens of new traditions, including all of the ways you and I celebrate this holiday. Certainly there were no Christmas trees and gift exchanges that first Christmas (the magi wouldn't show up for another couple of years). Santa wasn't on the scene yet, and there were no reindeer around the manger. Certainly there weren't any Christmas lights, stockings or eggnog.

Even today, Christmas traditions look different all over the world. In the Philippines, eleven separate villages compete against one another by building 20-ft electric lanterns. For the 13 days leading up to Christmas in Iceland, kids leave their shoes out by their beds so two mischievous trolls - called the Yule Lads - can leave them candy (or potatoes if they've been bad). In Caracas, Venezuela, everyone gets up

to go to Church on Christmas Eve, just like we did today. Except in Caracas, they all go to church on roller skates - the town even shuts down the roads because on Christmas Eve, it's safety first! And a town in Sweden has been building a 40' tall Yule Goat since 1966 - and every year people try to burn it down. Last year was the 29th time they succeeded.

What does your Christmas look like this year? Maybe you've got some time-honored family traditions. Or maybe this year is full of big changes. Maybe it's your first Christmas with a new baby, or with that special someone. Or maybe there's an absence this year that changes your traditions.

One thing is for sure: change will always be a part of Christmas. Because when Jesus came into the world, he came for every person, every culture.

We've talked a lot this Advent season about being sure in our preparations for Christmas, we don't forget to prepare for Christ himself. And now, we have arrived at the celebration of Christ coming into the world. Tomorrow begins 12 days of celebrating that Jesus has come. God is with us. The light shines in the world and the darkness can never overcome it.

We know that, no matter what our traditions look like this year, no matter how good or bad this year has been, no matter how hopefully we look toward 2018, God is with us. God is working to make all things new, and God has called us to be part of it. Christ has come to us as Christ has come to the world.

We know that God is not finished with the world. We know that Jesus' arrival on that first Christmas is a promise that he will return to bring life, justice and hope to us all.

Communion + Examen

God is with us

1. How have you prepared for Christ's coming this Christmas?
2. When have you been distracted from Jesus' coming this Advent season?
3. Where will you be tempted to ignore Jesus as you celebrate Christmas?
4. What does it look like to be present with Christ in your Christmas celebration over the next couple of weeks?

Assignment/Blessing

God is with us!