

Welcome

Good morning everyone - my name is Ashley and I'm a part of the teaching team here at Catalyst. Thanksgiving just happened and I think we all know what that means... Christmas movies are here and they're here to stay. Lifetime, Hallmark, ABC Family are all going to be showing Christmas movies almost nonstop, and I'm sure Netflix will release their fair share of Christmas movies as well. And of course, I'm sure we'll see everyone's favorite Christmas movie - Die Hard - trending on Netflix's Top 10 for most of December.

One of these staple Christmas movies is the *Elf* with Will Ferrell. For those of you that haven't seen it, the basic premise is that the main character, Buddy, is actually a human who was adopted and raised by Santa's elves. So, when he finds out, he returns to the very human world of New York to find his biological father. Of course, he's surprised when he does find his father, who turns out to be on the naughty list, which is very contrary to Buddy, out of whom Christmas cheer literally pours.

So, the whole movie, Buddy is trying to get his cynic of a father to respond to him - to again have Christmas cheer - to show Buddy that he does recognize a relationship with him, even if Buddy is a little different than other humans. We see this in a lot of different ways - he tries to fit into his dad's world but ends up calling someone his dad who is working with an "angry elf" and causes a lot of problems. He tries to help his dad's family decorate the tree and over-over-decorates. And lots of others.

I think this movie is perfect to outline the idea that we're going to really delve into today. Oftentimes I think our relationship with God can feel a lot like Buddy's relationship with his dad. Looking back on how crazy 2020 has been, it certainly feels to me like God is the cynical dad, who is removed from the chaos surrounding his human child. And at the same time it seems like we are the Buddy's of the relationship - constantly poking, constantly trying to get a response out of the other and only rarely succeeding.

This is not a fun feeling, but I know quite a few people who have felt this way about this year. It's been a rough one in a lot of different ways, and if you feel this way, trust me, you're not alone. Lots of people both now and throughout time have felt cried out for God, wondering where God is, begged God to show up. I don't say that to negate those feelings, but as an encouragement to you. We'll see today that even these feelings are a kind of hope-filled healing.

Because here's the truth: in *Elf*, the movie resolves, not because Buddy changes and becomes more human, but because his father is changed by Buddy, just the way he is. In this Advent journey, something different is going to happen:

As we work through our Advent journey, we'll discover what God's people have found over and over: God is not distant. God is with us. Advent is a journey of learning to see how God is present to us. And that journey can only happen when we're honest about where we begin.

At Catalyst, one way we observe Advent together is by lighting candles each week. These Advent candles represent our commitment to wait faithfully for Jesus' arrival. Since we're worshipping virtually this year, our Advent readers are virtual too. This week, Kristy Nolan and Trina Upshaw are lighting our first candle:

Message

We're in the season of Advent, which is the beginning of the Church year. During Advent, we choose to live in solidarity with God's people as they waited for the coming of the Messiah. We learn how they waited for Jesus' first coming, and it helps us navigate how to wait for Jesus' second coming.

Advent is all about hope and preparation. This year, our Advent series is called Christmas at the Crossroads. 2020 has been a year of change - at the national level with the election, at the cultural level with the pandemic. And 2021 is promising new horizons. So how can we be ready for those changes? How do we anticipate the future well?

Advent is a season of hope and preparation.

During this series, we're reading through the lectionary texts together, looking for how they intersect. Each Sunday, the lectionary brings us four texts - one from the Old Testament, one from the Psalms, one from the New Testament and one from the Gospels. All week, we read these texts together and ask where they come together. What is God saying to us through these texts?

We talk about Christmas as a "season" - Christmas music has already started playing in every store and on the radio, holidays movies are all around us, Christmas decorations have been out since October. And because that's what we're constantly bombarded with, it's easy to think of Advent as that same thing - basically 4 Sundays of Christmas - God is with us and all that. As we just discussed though, Advent isn't that - Advent is the hope and preparation part. And honestly, as one of those who has felt very bogged down by the trials that this year has brought, I don't want to do the expectantly waiting/preparation. I want the Christmas part now because I need that joy in my world now.

I'm sure there are lots of you all that share that sentiment. We want to rush to the part where we feel God's presence. We've been expectantly waiting for God to show up all year long and that consistently hasn't happened - so we're done with the expectant waiting. We just want God to show up already.

[**Scripture Slide 1**] If you'll turn or click with me over to Psalm 80, we'll see this feeling isn't a new one. This Psalm comes out of the time of Exile for the Israelites, so not only did they feel spiritually far from God, but they were also physically far from where the Temple once was - the place that God resided. Not unlike us being physically far from each other every Sunday when we virtually gather. We feel so physically far from each other and that can translate to us feeling

far from God. They felt it but on a much larger scale. And so, this psalm is them crying out for God to restore them, both spiritually and physically, and to be with them again.

Turn us again to yourself, O God. Make your face shine down upon us. Only then will we be saved. O Lord God of Heaven's Armies, how long will you be angry with our prayers. You have fed us with sorrow and made us drink tears by the bucketful. You have made us the scorn of neighboring nations. Our enemies treat us as a joke. Turn us again to yourself, O God of Heaven's Armies. Make your face shine down upon us. Only then will we be saved. - Psalm 80: 3-7

We can see pretty clearly that they, too, are tired of the expectant waiting. Much like Christmas, it's tempting to rush past this part. Or it's tempting to stop wearing a mask because you've done it long enough. Or to go out because you did the staying home thing. Or to go to the "God has healed them" part. Because again, it's not fun to feel like Buddy the Elf - constantly poking and prodding and trying to elicit a response.

The road to healing from trauma, like the Israelites experienced in the Exile and like we've experienced this year with the pandemic and social distancing and the election, is a lot of feeling distant. It's a lot of not yet feeling restored. This feeling can be evidence of trauma in your world and recognizing that feeling is vital to taking the first step in moving forward.

Step 1: Recognize the distance in your relationship with God can be evidence of trauma or some other big emotional situation that is not dealt with.

Here's the problem: we usually get stuck here. We don't want to feel this way, don't know what to do about it, don't feel like we should feel this way, and so usually end up ignoring it or avoiding it. We just go out because it feels normal. Or we put up our tree in October because we want things to feel normal and we want to avoid the problems in our culture or in our nation. The problem with ignoring the problem is that it never goes away if we ignore it. Especially trauma - until you acknowledge it and process through it, it's going to be this big looming thing in your world until you deal with it.

Let me repeat that (slowly): The problem with ignoring the problem is that it never goes away if we ignore it. Especially trauma - until you acknowledge it and process through it, it's going to be this big looming thing in your world until you deal with it.

[Scripture Slide 2] And actually, the Israelites kind of figure that out at one point. Turn with me over to Isaiah 64. This is now post-Exile. So, the Israelites have now returned home from Exile, but that has made them even more aware of the trauma they experienced. All they hoped for for years was to go home and they thought if they were able to go home, then everything would be able to go back to normal. But now they're home and they're realizing that everything is still different.

That's actually what trauma is - some event happens and everything that comes after that event is different than it was before and there's no going back to the before part.

So, the Israelites have come back from Exile with this hope that things would be the same as they were before, only to realize that nothing is the same because they themselves have changed. Let's start in verse 1:

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! (Isaiah 64: 1-2)

Remember - the Israelites know that God can physically show up - think of the Exodus from Egypt - God physically showed up and delivered them from that situation. And now they're like, "...man, can we go back to that?" We see memories on Facebook of a vacation or trip from last year and you think, "...man, can we go back to that?" When you get ready to go grab some dinner and realize, pre-covid picking up dinner at 8:30pm was okay, but post-covid, most restaurants are closing already and you think, "... man, can we go back to that?"

I have good news for you - that's the second step in beginning to work through the distance in your relationship with God. **Step 2: You have to recognize that things are different now than they were before**, which means you have to change the way you respond going forward because beginning to deal with our trauma is the only road to healing.

I'm also going to warn you from personal experience - once you start, it gets harder before it gets better. The way that I've always understood working through trauma kind of like this: you're in a swimming pool and it feels like you're drowning because the swimming pool is really full of all of the emotional things that have happened. You begin to work through it and quickly realize that processing all of those feelings is just as exhausting as treading water endlessly. But, once you start you begin to realize, "oh hey, i can feel the bottom." And you keep processing and then before you know it, you can stand just fine, but the water is still making it hard to move around. And you keep processing and then the swimming pool is empty, but now you're at the bottom of it and have to climb out.

I'm sure some of you understand this trauma feeling: like everything is different and, you're doing all the right things, but you're still drowning in the feelings that all the change this year stirred up. Ask yourself: What has caused that for you this year? Was it the social distancing? The pandemic itself and the fear for your loved ones? Was it the election? Was it something else entirely? Understanding why you're feeling the way you're feeling is important to understanding how to move forward.

[**Scripture Slide 3**] Turn with me over to Mark 13. In this story, Jesus is telling His disciples of the Second Coming because, by Jesus' time - which is hundreds of years after the Exile - this is a second coming that God's people have been waiting on since then. They were STILL in that

hopeful, expectant, preparation place. So, Jesus here is telling them that the thing they've been waiting for is just around the corner. Let's start in verse 28:

"Now learn a lesson from the fig tree. When its branches bud and its leaves begin to sprout, you know that summer is near. In the same way, when you see all these things taking place, you can know that his return is very near, right at the door. I tell you the truth, this generation will not pass from the scene before all these things take place. Heaven and earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear. "However, 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!" (Mark 13: 28-33)

In the same way as them, we don't actually know when the pandemic or social distancing will be over or what it will look like when it is over, but what Jesus is reminding both us and them is that first, there is an end to it, and second, that God is still faithfully working, even in the midst of the trauma we're experiencing. So, the question no longer is, "when will these feelings/this pandemic/this emotionally charged season end?" but it is, "how do we live well in the midst of it?" Life still goes on when you've had a traumatic event and we still have to decide how to live in the midst of the processing, or in the midst of the pandemic.

So, how do we act? Jesus says here that we stay on guard. We stay alert to that trauma looming within ourselves. We pay attention when we suddenly feel alone and far from God. We stay on guard for that in ourselves, in our loved ones, in our world. Why? Because we can't possibly be prepared for the "new normal" post-pandemic, let alone the Second Coming of Jesus where the world is restored, if we haven't yet dealt with the pain and grief that we're experiencing now.

Trauma and pain keep us from doing the good work that has been set before us, which is why we have to process it. So, again, how do we act in the meantime?

The answer is **Step 3: We deal with those looming things one step at a time.** For all of this, this means doing the hard work of understanding what caused us to feel this way and then using that as a key to understand how to ground ourselves in reality and move forward. For some of us, this means going to counseling. If you have significant trauma, like I do, I would suggest counseling for sure. And we have wonderful counselors that we're partnered with - Phil & Shuniqua Ortiz - their contact info is below if you feel like that is a route you need to go.

[Scripture Slide 4] Step 3 is a big step and it takes the longest. And if we're asking how we live in the midst of this step, I can tell you that participating in a community is vital. Turn with me over to 1 Corinthians. This is the opening to a letter that Paul is writing to the Corinthian church. Let's start in verse 4:

I always thank my God for you and for the gracious gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. Through him, God has enriched your church in every way—with all of your eloquent words and all of your knowledge. This confirms that what I told you about Christ is true.

Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. -- 1 Corinthians 1:4-7

What is so wonderful about a church community is that everyone is so different. Paul is tapping into that idea here - we have every spiritual gift we could need because we have a community of people with various spiritual gifts. You know what that also means? It means that everyone has different experiences and reacts differently to local, national, or global events differently. Some of us have trauma (hi, that's me) and when traumatic things happen globally (like a pandemic), boy does it put me in a tailspin. Some of us may not have trauma, but still have struggled with this pandemic. Some of us struggle with other things, but are actually doing okay right now.

That diversity allows for these really beautiful interactions within our community. I may need a shoulder to cry on today, which you can provide for me. Then, you may need some kind words tomorrow that I can provide for you. In theory, we are all different head spaces and i'm sure all of our emotional responses to this pandemic have been different.

So, if we know the following things - trauma and pain keep us from the good work set before us - as humans, we experience trauma - and as a FAITH community, we should have all the tools we need to handle this - then we must ask ourselves: are we the kind of faith community that fosters space for trauma and lamenting and grieving? Are we diverse enough to offer to our own community the kind of support Paul has talked about here? Beyond that, are we open to dealing honestly with our trauma, both individually and as a community?

Because here's the thing: the good work that we are called to is welcoming the world into God's love. We ought to, as a faith community, be able to process our trauma/pain/big emotional situations so that we have the space to help those who don't have the kind of support Paul mentions.

THIS is what active hoping looks like. THIS is how we respond in the midst of step 3. We look at that big looming thing and say, "things are different now... and that's okay." THAT is the active hoping that Advent welcomes us into.

Is it tough in the meantime? Absolutely. And allow yourself to feel that. Sometimes things just kind of... suck, especially in that expectant waiting time. And that's okay. I think we've established that God can handle a wide range of emotions from us.

As we enter into Advent, let's practice this active hoping for the future. Lets use Advent as a time to process and work through, so that we can go right into 2021 vigilant to the pain, grief, trauma, and distance that we know we can feel knowing that we can do something about it. AND so that we can encourage others to do something about it.

Communion is the way we actively hope on a weekly basis.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] No place better embodies how we are present to each other, and how God is present to us, than the communion table. This is the meal Jesus shared with his disciples the night before he was killed. We share this meal today to be present to God, to remember the good news of Advent, that God is with us.

Before we receive communion, I'm going to lead us in a prayer of examen. I'll ask you some questions and give you space to reflect prayerfully. Then I'll pray for all of us. Here's your first question:

1. How have I experienced God being present during the pandemic?
2. When have I experienced God as distant or absent in the last several months?
3. How can I be present to God during this Advent season?
4. How can I be present to my Catalyst community during this Advent season?

Prayer

God, you have gathered us today to begin this journey toward the Christmas miracle. We confess that, like our spiritual parents before us, we struggle to feel your presence in times of stress and pain. So today, you invite us to be united in our pain - not only with each other, but with generations of your people. You have invited us to see that you are present to us. As we approach your table this morning, we ask that these elements become a spiritual food. Let us experience your presence among us as we worship. We offer these prayers and approach your table today in the name of your son, Jesus.

The night Jesus was betrayed, he ate this meal with his disciples. During the meal, he broke bread and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, broken for you." After the meal was finished, he gave them a cup of wine, saying, "This is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sin."

So too, we eat and drink and remember Jesus' death until he returns. [Eat the wafer!]