

Welcome

I want to open with a question today: What's the point of taking care of the world? (You can feel free to put your answers in the livechat if you want.)

A few years ago, I ran a book club that was about half atheists, half Christians. We were reading a book written by an atheist and a Christian where they debated various theological issues, and this particular question came up.

One of my atheist friends in the book club pointed out that thing we celebrate during Advent season - that Christians believe, sooner or later, Jesus is going to come back and make a new heaven and new earth, where we'll all live with him faithfully. His question was how anyone who seriously believes this could possibly genuinely care about what happens on this side of the Second Coming.

Why should Christians bother caring for the world? Why should we bother taking care of people who are sick, oppressed or hurting? Why not just tell them Jesus loves them so they know the truth and can go to heaven?

Now, as you can imagine, quite a spirited debate erupted in the wake of his question, and it wasn't divided the way you might think. Plenty of Christians believe exactly the way my friend described.

I was raised in a church where I heard this debate about missions over and over: should Christians bother with meeting the physical needs of those to whom we minister, or only focus on the "spiritual" needs (which meant leading them in the sinner's prayer)?

And I've heard plenty of Christians, including influential preachers, insist Christians need not be concerned about pollution, climate change, recycling or anything else that relates to caring for the world because God is going to destroy it all anyway.

Now, if you hang around Catalyst very long at all, you know we reject both of those ideas. We deeply believe that the physical is spiritual and vice versa, and we believe the world is a gift from God to us, one worthy of our care.

But *why*? Today I want to circle back to my friend's question: why should Christians care about either of these, especially if we know what the End is going to look like?

<Advent Reading>

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?

Last week, Ashley helped us to acknowledge what we all know: this year has been *rough*. We're all dealing with various amounts of trauma, and part of hope is trusting that, with God's help, we can name it, work through it and heal.

Today, we're going to acknowledge another important part of hoping: we hope because we don't immediately experience God's presence. How many times have you wondered, over the last several months, where God is? I know I've heard it voiced from strangers, friends and family alike.

And that's a totally *normal* question to ask in the midst of pain and trauma. It's a natural response. In fact, hope can't be hope until we acknowledge our sense of lack. (You can't hope for what you have, after all.)

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Isaiah 40. This is the beginning of what scholars call "Second Isaiah", a section of the book written by a disciple of the original prophet. Second Isaiah is ministering after the Exile, when God's people were decimated by the Babylonian empire. It's after the Exile that God's people really began to look for a Messiah.

The overriding theme of Second Isaiah is comfort - speaking peace and hope to a people in crisis (sound familiar?). So as we read this together, I want you to keep in mind: the text is *beautiful*. The images it offers are powerful comforts. But they're only that *because they're addressed to a people in crisis*. If they weren't experiencing trauma, this message wouldn't be necessary in the first place.

Comfort, comfort my people," says your God.

"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."

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!
Fill in the valleys, and level the mountains and hills.
Straighten the curves, and smooth out the rough places.
Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all people will see it together.
The LORD has spoken!"

A voice said, "Shout!"
I asked, "What should I shout?"
"Shout that people are like the grass.
Their beauty fades as quickly
as the flowers in a field.
The grass withers and the flowers fade
beneath the breath of the LORD.
And so it is with people.
The grass withers and the flowers fade,
but the word of our God stands forever."

O Zion, messenger of good news,
shout from the mountaintops!
Shout it louder, O Jerusalem.
Shout, and do not be afraid.

Tell the towns of Judah,
"Your God is coming!"
Yes, the Sovereign LORD is coming in power.
He will rule with a powerful arm.
See, he brings his reward with him as he comes.

He will feed his flock like a shepherd.
He will carry the lambs in his arms,
holding them close to his heart.
He will gently lead the mother sheep with their young. -- Isaiah 40:1-11

To a people crying out for God's presence, God says, "Here is some comfort: I am coming. You have suffered long enough and now I am going to comfort you, restore you, heal you, shepherd you."

These are powerful words, and yet by their very nature, they point to a lack of God's presence. God *will* feed. God *will* carry. God *is coming*. God *will* rule.

Some of us might here that and despair. But I have a hunch that a lot of us really do find the comfort Isaiah promised. The world is not as it should be. When we look around and feel overwhelmed, anxious, afraid - well, those aren't wrong reactions.

We can only receive comfort in the first place if we are in a place of distress.

[Scripture Slide 2] In fact, if we're going to press on this a little harder, we might as the question only the most cynical among us dare to ask: how do we know God is really going to show up? After all, we live in a world of broken promises. How can we be sure this comfort God promises through the prophet is truly on its way?

Let's head to Psalm 85. This is song of hope, a song celebrating what God *will* do. As we read, though, pay attention to the tenses of the various verbs. What we'll hear is a song that celebrates the certainty of God's action in the future based on the reality of God's activity in the past. In other words, we can trust God to move because God is *faithful*.

LORD, you poured out blessings on your land! You restored the fortunes of Israel. You forgave the guilt of your people— yes, you covered all their sins.

...I listen carefully to what God the LORD is saying, for he speaks peace to his faithful people. But let them not return to their foolish ways. Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him, so our land will be filled with his glory.

Unfailing love and truth have met together. Righteousness and peace have kissed! Truth springs up from the earth, and righteousness smiles down from heaven.

Yes, the LORD pours down his blessings. Our land will yield its bountiful harvest. Righteousness goes as a herald before him, preparing the way for his steps. -- Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

God has poured out God's blessings on the land and restored Israel's fortunes *so surely God must be near now*. Again, I'm struck by the mixture of certainty and hope in the psalm. Yes God is saving us. Unfailing love and truth have met together. So God is pouring out blessings on us. These sound like factual statements and yet they're coming from a place of distress, a place where the psalmist can say *surely* God's salvation must be near. It *must* be. Because that's who God is.

The Psalmist is able to be certain because of their trust in God's character. God hasn't failed us yet, and God's not about to start now.

[Scripture Slide 3] But, of course, the question this begs is, "Well if God's salvation is *near*, then why isn't it *here*?" For that answer, we need to turn to today's Gospel text in Mark 1, and connect it to the New Testament reading in 2 Peter 3. Mark is one of two Gospels that *doesn't* open with a Christmas story. Rather, as is appropriate for this season, we might say Mark opens with an Advent story. Jesus is coming, but he hasn't quite arrived yet. Instead, we open on the prophet John the Baptizer. John understands his role to be getting people ready for Jesus' arrival. And what does he do?

He tells them to repent, to turn to God and seek out forgiveness.

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. All of Judea, including all the people of Jerusalem, went out to see and hear John. And when they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. His clothes were woven from coarse camel hair, and he wore a leather belt around his waist. For food he ate locusts and wild honey.

John announced: “Someone is coming soon who is greater than I am—so much greater that I’m not even worthy to stoop down like a slave and untie the straps of his sandals. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit!” -- Mark 1:4-8

This is a pretty basic observation - but one so basic we maybe overlook it: the appropriate response to God's nearness is repentance. When we learn God is close (as Isaiah, the Psalmist and John all insist), we ought to scour our lives for any trace of sin, confess it to God and repent.

[Scripture Slide 4] Because, according to 2 Peter, that's actually *why* God is distant. God wants to give us space to repent, and to embody the need for repentance to the world around us. Let's read the words in 2 Peter because the letter is addressing that exact same question we have: if God is near, why isn't God just *here*?

But you must not forget this one thing, dear friends: A day is like a thousand years to the Lord, and a thousand years is like a day. The Lord isn't really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent. But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment.

Since everything around us is going to be destroyed like this, what holy and godly lives you should live, looking forward to the day of God and hurrying it along. On that day, he will set the heavens on fire, and the elements will melt away in the flames. But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness.

And so, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to be found living peaceful lives that are pure and blameless in his sight.

And remember, our Lord's patience gives people time to be saved. -- 2 Peter 3:8-15a

God's patience gives people time to be saved. God's patience is an act of grace, a mercy to all of us, to the world. Yes, we want God to tear open the heavens. We want God to put an end to all this wickedness, pain, lies and misery. But what we don't consider is how we might be complicit in those things. We don't consider the people who might be destroyed in God's coming.

So we have John, coming among us saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" We have Peter saying, "Remember: our Lord's patience gives people time to be saved."

My atheist friend asked how God's people could really care about anyone or anything on this side of the End, if we knew heaven awaited. And here's the answer:

God could return and end things whenever God wants. If *heaven* was all God cared about, this would have all been gone long before you and I ever got here.

But God is waiting, working according to God's own mysterious time table, in part so that we all have a chance to hear the good news that God is near. So we all have a chance to respond.

Those of us who follow God care for the same reason: because what matters most to us *isn't* our own good, but the good of our neighbor, of all those who don't know God. We care because God cares. We love because God loves.

So while we're waiting, what are we doing? How are you spending this Advent, as we look toward Christmas?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus invites us to his table, where he is near to us.

1. Where do I see a need for God's presence in the world around me?
2. What is God calling me to repent of in this Advent season?
3. How can I respond to God this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Since everything around us is going to be destroyed like this, what holy and godly lives you should live, looking forward to the day of God and hurrying it along. On that day, he will set the heavens on fire, and the elements will melt away in the flames. But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, a world filled with God's righteousness.