

Welcome

A couple of weeks ago, Ashley brought up one of our most beloved Christmas movies, Elf. Elf is one of those Christmas movies that belongs wholly in the secular realm. Like Trading Places and Die Hard, Elf is a Christmas movie that doesn't reference the actual Christmas story at all. Yes there are lights and Christmas trees and endless treats. But no nativity scene. Not a mention of baby Jesus or the manger.

But I would submit that, despite the lack of explicit Jesus in Elf, it's a deeply Christian Christmas film. Part of that is the Christmas journey Buddy undergoes: a child leaves his divine home to inhabit our ordinary world, and transforms it. But a big part of it is the journey of Buddy's dad, Walter.

Walter lives in a world all too familiar to all of us: he manufactures cheer and goodwill without experiencing it himself. He's cynical, suspicious and closed off - the total opposite of Buddy. And while his family - led by Buddy - draws him closer and closer to that joy-filled world of Christmas, one where the cynical Walter can believe in something bigger than himself.

It's the climactic moment of the movie where Santa's sleigh *almost* has enough magic to fly, but something's missing: Walter's belief! It's not enough for Walter to accept his son is truly his son. It's not enough that he's met the real Santa. Walter has to let go of his ego, his pride, his cynicism and *believe*.

And how does he do that? By singing loud for all to hear.

Friends, in a cynical world, the most courageous thing we can do is believe, loud and proud.

This is the third Sunday of Advent. It's the Sunday we light the pink candle. The third Sunday of Advent is always my favorite because it's the day we insist that hope is joyful. When we prepare, when we wait, we don't do it dourly. We do it with a heart full of anticipation. Excitement and joy fill our spirits because we know what God is up to.

Christmas is, after all, about peace *on earth* and goodwill to *all people*. It's a holiday with real-world consequences.

So we're going to sing today. Loud and proud.

But before we sing, we have to light that pink 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?

Ashley began by helping 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.

Last week, we saw that a big part of the reason we're waiting is because of God's grace. God is giving us - and the rest of the world - chances to respond to the Christmas miracle, to repent and turn to Jesus.

Today, in the midst of our celebrating, we're asking what, exactly, we're celebrating. It's easy, after all, to let Christmas fade into sentiment - positive feelings we call peace and goodwill, but are more often simply temporary ceasefires or saccharine sentimentality that, like too much eggnog, leaves us feeling the worse for wear once the season is over.

After all, the real reason we love Christmas isn't the thing itself - lights, trees, gifts. It's the deeper truth those things point toward.

So, since today is the Advent Sunday of celebration, I want to ask what we're celebrating. We're going to move through our texts for the week, and - as we have throughout this series so far - ask what they all have in common.

First is Isaiah 61. I just want to read the first two verses with you today. These verses are notable because they're the passage Jesus quotes when he teaches in his hometown of Nazareth. Theologians consider this Jesus' 'mission statement'.

What's profound about Jesus using this passage is his insistence that the meaning of his Christmas coming is part of God's long tradition of rescuing humanity through Israel. The prophet's mission hundreds of years before Jesus is Jesus' mission is *our* mission.

In Jesus, we see most perfectly who God is, and what God is about. So let's hear what God says God is about:

**The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is upon me,
for the LORD has anointed me**

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted
and to proclaim that captives will be released
and prisoners will be freed.

He has sent me to tell those who mourn
that the time of the LORD's favor has come,
and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies. -- Isaiah 61:1-2

None of these are abstract. Good news for the *poor* (that's measured in economic terms). Comfort for the brokenhearted (emotional and social trauma). Captives will be released and prisoners freed. (that's political. It's justice language.) The prophet and Jesus understood that, when God's Spirit falls on us, it results not in good feelings or inward transformation alone. The Spirit creates real, measurable change in our world.

Christmas isn't just peace 'in our hearts'. It's peace *on Earth*. We see the same movement in the song for this week, which comes not from the Psalms, but from Mary, Jesus' mother. This is the song she sang when she found out she was pregnant with Jesus. Again, listen to how little "oh yay I'm pregnant what color should we paint the nursery?" there is and how much Mary focuses on the implications of Jesus' birth for the world at large:

Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!
For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed.

For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me.
He shows mercy from generation to generation to all who fear him.
His mighty arm has done tremendous things!
He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.
He has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands.
He has helped his servant Israel and remembered to be merciful.
For he made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children forever." -- Luke 1:46-55

A couple of things are very obvious from this song:

First, Mary totally knew.

Second, she understood Jesus' birth was about much more than just her and Joseph's little family getting a bit bigger. Jesus' birth had massive implications for the *whole world*.

These songs are responses by God's people to the announcement of God's movement. The prophet celebrated that God was ending the people's long exile. Mary celebrated the birth of a baby who would

upend the world's unjust systems. Jesus himself quoted the prophet to advertise as clearly as possible that he was here to bring peace on earth and goodwill to all people.

Economic justice.

Emotional and social justice.

Political justice.

For Jesus, all of these are spiritual realities. He aims to rescue and redeem the whole world, not just the 'spiritual' part (whatever that is).

The last two texts for this week are, again, about how we respond to this reality. The Gospel text focuses again on John the Baptizer (I love that, as far as the Gospels are concerned, Advent is basically John's holiday). Again and again, the texts about John reveal - as we saw last week - a man who was desperate to prepare God's people for God's coming. He understood that God's arrival on Christmas heralded massive changes, so he wanted God's people to be ready for them.

John says as much to those who challenged his teachings:

This was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders sent priests and Temple assistants from Jerusalem to ask John, "Who are you?" He came right out and said, "I am not the Messiah."

"Well then, who are you?" they asked. "Are you Elijah?"

"No," he replied.

"Are you the Prophet we are expecting?"

"No."

"Then who are you? We need an answer for those who sent us. What do you have to say about yourself?"

John replied in the words of the prophet Isaiah:

"I am a voice shouting in the wilderness,
'Clear the way for the LORD's coming!'"

Then the Pharisees who had been sent asked him, "If you aren't the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet, what right do you have to baptize?"

John told them, "I baptize with water, but right here in the crowd is someone you do not recognize. Though his ministry follows mine, I'm not even worthy to be his slave and untie the straps of his sandal."

This encounter took place in Bethany, an area east of the Jordan River, where John was baptizing. --
John 1:19-28

For a lot of us, that looks like repentance. We can hold these two passages up like a mirror and ask, Do these describe my life? Am I good news to the poor? Comfort for the afflicted? Am I working for the real-world justice of my neighbor?

If not, then I need to repent, because Jesus is coming. And I want to be on his side!

I'll be the first to admit that "work for justice" and "good news for the poor" are big concepts. And I hope we're working for those, but I also hope we're allowing the Christmas story to challenge and transform us in smaller ways.

As Paul is closing the letter to the Thessalonians, he writes this:

Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus. Do not stifle the Holy Spirit. Do not scoff at prophecies, but test everything that is said. Hold on to what is good. Stay away from every kind of evil. -- 1 Thessalonians 5:16-22

This is good, practical advice. Always be in prayer. Find ways to give thanks in every circumstance. Test everything that's said (timely advice in a world of fake news!).

Friends, we know Jesus is returning for our world. We know we live in a world of cynics, a world that rushes to judgment. We know our world has plenty of manufactured sentimentality, but little substance.

Much like poor Walter in Elf, we need to stand tall and sing loud for all to hear.

So we're going to sing some more songs this morning, and we're going to let our songs be a promise to our whole community that we're going to be about the work of love and justice.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide]

1. What do I have to celebrate as I prepare for Christmas?
2. What is making it hard to celebrate this year?
3. How can my celebration be an act of hope this Advent?

Assignment + Blessing

Now may the God of peace make you holy in every way, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless until our Lord Jesus Christ comes again. God will make this happen, for he who calls you is faithful. -- 1 Thessalonians 5:23-24