

Welcome

Well, it's almost Christmas. And I assume that, like me, your Christmas is going to look really different this year. For the last six Christmas Eves, when we're finished with our Christmas Eve worship, Amanda and I have joined John and Vanessa Hewitt and their family for a Tex-Mex Christmas Eve feast.

We're not doing that this year because of the pandemic.

And ever since I've been in ministry, I've not travelled for Christmas - I made a commitment to spend Christmas and Easter - our two most important holidays - with my church family. So on Christmas day, Amanda and I always go see 2-3 movies in the theater, and then start watching all our Christmas must-watches (like Love Actually, Die Hard and Christmas Vacation).

A reality we had to face this year is that we're not going to have our Christmas traditions thanks to COVID. No Tex-Mex Christmas Eve with dear friends. No movie theaters on Christmas Day.

I know we're all in that same boat, and now - just days before Christmas, it's hitting us hard. Family we're not seeing. Trips we're not taking. Necks we're not hugging. Presents arriving by mail rather than down chimneys.

And, again, I know we've all known this for a while, but it's *really* starting to sink in now. And over the next week, it's going to be even more painfully real.

So today, on this final Advent Sunday, I want to explore how we celebrate Christmas in the midst of this disappointment. We're going to do that as we have throughout this series, by charting out the intersection of the four lectionary passages for this week. And what we'll see is that the good news of Advent is that God meets us in our disappointment. God's no stranger to Plan B, C or even D. God is with us, and we can know God is working for our good. Even when Christmas doesn't go like we thought.

Since we've been worshipping virtually, our Advent readers are also virtual this year. And today, we're lighting the fourth Advent 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.

Next, 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.

Last week, we remembered that the Christmas story is about real, measurable peace and goodwill for all people. It's not a private celebration, but a public good.

Today, we're remembering that none of us is where we really want to be right now. For most of us, that's specifically because of COVID. But the pandemic isn't the only reason for some of us. 2020, like every other year, has been a mix of loss, family strife, changes and more.

Christmas is *always* a complicated holiday, and that's one of the reasons not rushing past Advent is so important. But a pandemic sure does make this a perfect year to talk about what happens when our plans don't work out.

That's the intersection I found in our four texts for the week - the reassurance that God is still working, even when we can't discern how. That God still has plans in the works, even when mine don't work out.

[**Scripture Slide 1**] Turn with me to 2 Samuel 7. This takes place after David has become king. He's built himself a fancy (for the time) palace in Jerusalem, using all the finest materials of his day. It's been quite a long time since God's people settled in the Promised Land, and in all that time, they worshipped God in a tabernacle, which was literally a big tent.

So you can imagine the optics here: David has just used tax money to build a huge, beautiful, state of the art palace. When people want to see the King, they have to come to this amazing estate. But then they go to worship God and it's in a tent. A nice tent, with gold furniture and stuff... but still a tent.

So David makes a plan: he's going to build God a fancy temple. But God has other plans. As we read, listen to God's reasoning for not allowing David to build a Temple:

When King David was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all the surrounding enemies, the king summoned Nathan the prophet. "Look," David said, "I am living in a beautiful cedar

palace, but the Ark of God is out there in a tent!” Nathan replied to the king, “Go ahead and do whatever you have in mind, for the LORD is with you.” But that same night the LORD said to Nathan,

“Go and tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD has declared: Are you the one to build a house for me to live in? I have never lived in a house, from the day I brought the Israelites out of Egypt until this very day. I have always moved from one place to another with a tent and a Tabernacle as my dwelling. Yet no matter where I have gone with the Israelites, I have never once complained to Israel’s tribal leaders, the shepherds of my people Israel. I have never asked them, “Why haven’t you built me a beautiful cedar house?”’

“Now go and say to my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD of Heaven’s Armies has declared: I took you from tending sheep in the pasture and selected you to be the leader of my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have destroyed all your enemies before your eyes. Now I will make your name as famous as anyone who has ever lived on the earth! And I will provide a homeland for my people Israel, planting them in a secure place where they will never be disturbed. Evil nations won’t oppress them as they’ve done in the past, starting from the time I appointed judges to rule my people Israel. And I will give you rest from all your enemies...

Your house and your kingdom will continue before me for all time, and your throne will be secure forever.’” -- 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

God first reminds David that God doesn't need a house. A tent was good enough for all of David's ancestors, and a tent is fine for David's generation as well. (This gets retconned in 1 Chronicles to say that it's because David was a warrior.) But here, it's because God is running a different agenda, one that doesn't include David building him a temple (David's son, Solomon, will do that decades from this moment).

But for now, God wants David to focus on *David's* legacy. (It's also worth noting David doesn't do this. He proves to be a pretty awful king, husband and father. The legacy he leaves ultimately divides the kingdom in half and paves the way for the destruction of God's people in the Exile.

It's precisely David's obsession with his image, with his plans, that keeps him from being the king God called him to be. God invites David here toward a very different path. And David misses it.

[Scripture Slide 2] Nothing could be a starker contrast than Mary's response to God's invitation. Turn with me to Luke 1. I love so much about this story. I love that our whole faith begins with a choice to believe a woman. I love that Mary, in this moment, becomes the first follower of Jesus, the first to believe he is the Messiah. And I love that God insists on consent, inviting Mary to become the mother of Jesus, even though it will upend her plans.

If you've been around church much at all, hopefully you've heard how disruptive this pregnancy would prove to be for Mary. She's engaged to be married, so to learn that she's pregnant before her wedding,

and by someone other than her fiancée would be scandalous. And I know some of us want to say, "But didn't she just tell people it was God's baby?" and to that, I want to ask you to imagine a young woman said that *today*. How would we respond? And we at least have precedent!

So with all that in mind, I want to read with you the story of Mary's Yes to God (which required her to say No to whatever plans she had for her life).

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she has conceived a son and is now in her sixth month. For the word of God will never fail."

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And then the angel left her. -- Luke 1:26-38

David was a man who couldn't get out of his own way. A man who couldn't let go of his own plans, his own image. Mary offered a courageous Yes to God. She put her faith in God's plan, God's way - even though it meant she had to sacrifice her own ideas of what her life was going to look like.

But I can't help but note *God's* faithfulness. Yes, David failed. He didn't finish strong. He didn't rule as God's faithful king. But did you see what God said to Mary? "God will give him the throne of his ancestor David."

God remained faithful to God's promises. God ensures that David's line remains on the throne by God entering into David's line. God *becomes* the faithful king David never was.

[Scripture Slide 3] Skip a little further down in Luke 1. No wonder Mary sings the song she does. (And yes, you may have noticed that Mary's Song, the Magnificat, was in our readings two weeks in a row. That's because it's one of the best passages in the Bible. We could spend a year just in this song!)

Something Mary recognizes is that what makes her great is not her own efforts at preserving her legacy, but how God chooses to act in her life. God's faithfulness to Mary makes her noteworthy. And Mary's courageous Yes to God is what makes God's faithfulness to her possible.

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

God's faithfulness to Mary isn't an isolated incident. This is how God works in our world. The grace Mary received is the grace God visits upon all from princes and powerful to the hungry and humble. It's the grace of giving us all what we need, rather than what we want. It's the grace of inviting us all to join into God's great movement in the world - a movement toward justice for each and every person in the world.

[Scripture Slide 4] Our last scripture is the last few verses of Paul's letter to the Romans. It was a letter written to an ethnically and culturally mixed congregation - Jewish and Gentile, and the whole letter has been about how both groups are united as one spiritual family now. Neither Jewish nor Gentile, but Jesus people. The Jews knew about the plan; the Gentiles didn't. But because Jesus has come, both are welcomed in as siblings, equals. It's an appropriate way to close this meditation because *no one* saw this coming.

It goes without saying that the Gentiles didn't anticipate Jesus' coming. They had all sorts of other beliefs, understandings of the way the world worked. Jesus' arrival upended their whole worlds. But the same was true of the Jewish people. They looked more for a conquering king - one like David who was about his own agenda (which was their way of hoping for *their* agenda). What they got instead was the son of a humble woman, a nobody from nowhere who showed them what God has really been up to in their story.

As we read this last passage together, I want you to hold all those Christmas plans that aren't going to be this year. Take your family you won't see in person, the meals you're not making, the trips you're not taking, all the stuff that's not going to be the way it was last year.

And receive this as a blessing: God has not abandoned us. God isn't ignoring us. Rather, God continues to be present, continues to be at work. God is still inviting us - like God invited Mary - to believe the good news of Christmas: God is with us.

Now all glory to God, who is able to make you strong, just as my Good News says. This message about Jesus Christ has revealed his plan for you Gentiles, a plan kept secret from the beginning of time. But now as the prophets foretold and as the eternal God has commanded, this message is made known to all Gentiles everywhere, so that they too might believe and obey him. All glory to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, forever. Amen. -- Romans 16:25-27

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We come to the table to receive Jesus' presence.

1. What sources of joy do I see in my life as we approach Christmas?
2. What plans fell through this year? Where am I grieving their loss?
3. How can I celebrate God's presence this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Now all glory to God, who is able to make you strong, just as my Good News says. -- Romans 16:15