

Welcome

Last year, Amanda and I bought this *Nightmare Before Christmas* Advent Calendar. Every day, you get to open it to find a new little figurine from the Tim Burton movie.

That movie always sparks debate: is it a Christmas movie or a Halloween movie? (For the record, it's a Halloween movie.) If you haven't seen it, the plot revolves around Jack Skelington, the Pumpkin King of Halloween Town. He accidentally discovers a portal to Christmas Town and decides to replace Santa. Things go wrong and eventually Jack has to rescue Santa so Santa can save Christmas and Jack returns to Halloween Town with a new lease on, uh, afterlife.

The movie's weird, to say the least, particularly because it combines Christmas with horror - something we don't typically associate with Christmas (unless you're a weirdo like me).

In fact, even though it's a Disney movie, Disney released it under another studio brand - Touchstone - because they thought it was too scary for kids. But the movie went on to be a huge success and today enjoys a massive cult following (massive enough to warrant, for instance, Advent calendars!).

Why? What is it about the joy of Christmas juxtaposed with the horror of Halloween that resonates so strongly with us?

I want to suggest today that the success of *The Nightmare Before Christmas* is no accident. There is, in fact, a space between Halloween Town and Christmas Town where most of us live. It's the Advent space - a place where we acknowledge the realities of the world around us and also hope for a better world.

Welcome to Advent Town. Let's worship together!

Message

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the four weeks leading to Christmas. This is a strange season for us, but it's a really important one for us as a people of Faith.

Advent does something funny with time. This is the beginning of the Church year, and we begin by... waiting. During Advent, we join our spiritual ancestors as they waited for God's promised rescuer. So we look back.

But of course we know that deliverer was born. So we also read their longing in light of what was to come. We look forward.

Advent is about preparing to celebrate Christmas, which is when Jesus was born. Our Christmas celebrations are full of nostalgia, not just for Jesus' birth, but for family and food and all the traditions that ground us. We look backward.

But in waiting with our ancestors, we also recognize that the world is not as God would have it be. We know that God is still at work, bringing justice and hope to the dark places in our lives and our world. So we look forward.

This year, our series is called O Christmas Tree. There's no more universal symbol of Christmas these days than that very particular tradition from Northern Europe: an evergreen tree, decorated with lights and tinsel. That tree, twinkling in the darkness, the mystery of gifts hidden beneath wrapping paper and bows promising that good things are on the horizon.

The Christmas Tree is a promise that Christmas is coming, much in the way Advent invites us to prepare for Jesus. So during this series, we're asking how God is present with us, even as we look for God to move in new ways.

Advent begins with this image: a single candle, burning in the darkness. Which is how so many of us feel in this season. We live in a world where we're constantly bombarded by bad news. Barely a day goes by that I don't hear someone lament that we get too much bad news.

Believe it or not, it's exactly this glut of information that creates that experience of horror for us. Historian Scott Poole, in his book *Wasteland*, demonstrated that the modern horror genre originated from World War I precisely because it was so much bloodier and more brutal than any war in human history. Before WWI, wars were a few hundred men charging each other with swords, maybe on horseback. What guns there were fired slowly and inaccurately.

But WWI was the war of machine guns, mortars, trenches and gas. WWI left permanent scars on our global psyche. Being exposed to that much violence and injustice broke something in us.

And the trend has continued since. It's only accelerated with global media, then social media enabling us to experience the injustices of the world nearly first hand.

Even a hundred years ago, most people couldn't experience the vast majority of the hurt and pain happening in the world. It's not that there was less of it (there may very well have been more!). It's just that we didn't have access.

But now we live in a world where all of it is at our fingertips. We're inundated, overwhelmed. And it's easy to feel horrified. Hopeless. As though things are only ever getting worse.

It's easy to feel as though whatever hope we might have is a single, small candle, flickering in the dark.

So today we're going to explore the nature of hope, a hope that is informed by Christmas past and future.

Turn with us to [Jeremiah 33](#).

Jeremiah the prophet lived at the worst time in Israel's history. He was God's prophet when Babylon destroyed Judah and took the political, religious and social leaders into exile. Jeremiah was the lone voice warning that if God's people didn't repent, they would be destroyed. They didn't listen, so Jeremiah got to watch his prophecies come true.

Which was the worst 'I told you so' ever. Jeremiah continued to serve God's people after the destruction of Jerusalem, God's temple and everything they knew.

He promised that this end wasn't THE end. That God remained faithful and that God was already at work to rescue and restore the very people whose unfaithfulness led to Babylon's conquest.

Chapter 33 is in what scholars call the 'little book of comfort'. It's three chapters where Jeremiah really leans into God's promise, God's faithfulness. And right here toward the end of those words of comfort, God makes a promise in the form of... well, a tree.

Let's read:

"The day will come, says the Lord, when I will do for Israel and Judah all the good things I have promised them.

"In those days and at that time
I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David's line.
He will do what is just and right throughout the land.
In that day Judah will be saved,
and Jerusalem will live in safety.

And this will be its name: 'The Lord Is Our Righteousness.' -- Jeremiah 33:14-16 (NLT)

That 'righteous descendent' in the original Hebrew is 'righteous branch'.

Yeah, it's a family tree metaphor. The rulers of Judah were descendents of King David, the most famous of Israel's long line of kings. God made a covenant with David that one of his descendents would always be on the throne, and in the wake of Babylon's conquest, it looked like God had abandoned even this promise.

After all, there was *no one* on the throne now. And the kings who *had* been on the throne weren't exactly good, just kings. The whole cause of the Exile was that they *weren't* righteous. They didn't rule as God would.

So the first thing God promises is that God's ancient promise isn't null and void. Quite the opposite - God has plans to raise up a new king, and this one will enact God's love as justice throughout the land. Everyone will benefit from his rule - not just the wealthy, powerful or privileged.

A couple of important notes here:

First, as we hope, it's good for us to see the pain in the world. It hurts, but Jeremiah hurt, too. He didn't hide from the pain.

Too often, we want our Christmas celebrations to look like a Norman Rockwell painting - all bright lights and smiling faces. Many of us crave this season, start pulling out decorations before Halloween is even over because we want to wrap ourselves in lights and tinsel and ignore the pain of the world around us (or within us).

But God didn't call Jeremiah out of Israel. God called Jeremiah to a hurting, traumatized people. Some scholars call Jeremiah the 'weeping prophet' because he's so in touch with the people's pain. He didn't remain distant. He lived with them.

So too, as we prepare for Christmas, we should keep our attention to the world around us. We must make space around our tables and under our trees for a world that is not yet what it will be. A world of broken and strained relationships, a world of grieving and loneliness. A world that is waiting, a world that is becoming.

Another thing: note that all Jeremiah promises is that "a day is coming." He doesn't know when God's new thing is going to happen. And in fact, Jeremiah gets it a little bit wrong! If you keep reading, you'll see that one of the things Jeremiah imagines here is a restoration of the Levitical priesthood. Which is a way of saying he imagines the Temple coming back. Things going back to the way they used to be, only better.

But we know that God's new thing was coming on that Christmas Day as Jesus himself. God became human. And when he did, the Temple was fulfilled. Jesus became the new temple, the site where heaven and earth meet. Rather than a building, we have his body - which becomes all of us, the Church.

That's not something Jeremiah saw coming. To be fair, it's not something *anyone* saw coming.

Even Jeremiah, the prophet who was right when everyone else was wrong, even *he* didn't have the holy imagination to see what God was up to.

As we prepare for Christmas, as we stretch our minds and our spirits to try to imagine what God might be up to, we understand that what is ahead of us is greater than what lies behind us.

Can you imagine that? Whatever is next for Catalyst, it's not going to look like what came before us.

Whatever is next for the Church in America, it's not going to look like the institution that brought us here.

Whatever is ahead for you and me, it's not going to look like what came before. How could it? What came before is part of what made the world what it is.

Finally, Jeremiah promised that this coming king's rule will be so righteous that the capital city will become known not as 'Jerusalem' but 'Yahweh is our Righteousness'.

The Hebrew word rendered as 'righteousness' is also translated 'justice'.

So what this city will be known for is taking its lead from Yahweh.

Justice isn't an abstract concept. It's not what our justice system says it is.

Justice (which, if you remember Debbie's sermon from a month ago is what love looks like in public) is what we see in Yahweh's example.

And that's why Christmas matters. Because Jesus came into our world to show us who God is. Jesus is the promised King Jeremiah saw all those years ago. And Jesus shows us who God is, what God's love looks like in public.

Advent is a season of waiting. But it's a waiting where we are looking and preparing, expecting that God is doing something new. We put ourselves in a position to see what God is doing next, and we prepare to join God in that new thing.

A Lutheran pastor named Heidi Neumark reflected on Advent while serving in one of the roughest parts of the Bronx. She said, "Probably the reason I love Advent so much is that it is a reflection of how I feel most of the time. I might not feel sorry during Lent, when the liturgical calendar begs repentance. I might not feel victorious, even though it is Easter morning. I might not feel full of the Spirit even though it is Pentecost and the liturgy spins out fiery gusts of ecstasy. But during Advent, I am always in sync with the season." -- Rev. Heidi Neumark

Advent unfailingly embraces and comprehends my reality. And what is that? I think of the Spanish word anhelo, or longing. Advent is when the church can no longer contain its unfulfilled desire and the cry of anhelo bursts forth: Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! O Come, O Come, Emmanuel!

Friends, we are entering into a season of hope. That hope exists as this candle, flickering in the darkness.

I want to invite you today to bring all your fears, your anxieties, your disappointments with you and hold them before God. This is the time we join together and ask, "How long, O Lord?" When will you heal? When will you restore? When will you make right?

And we put ourselves in a posture of hope, believing God is at work, that the light is winning.

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to a simple act of hope.

When in the last week have I found hope?

When in the last week have I found it hard to hope?

When in this next month will I struggle to hope?

How can I make space to hope during this Advent season?

Assignment + Blessing