

## Welcome

One Christmas tradition Amanda and I have is going to see movies on Christmas Day. Since we do a big Christmas eve worship gathering, typically our Christmas Day is super low key. So we'll get tickets to a couple of movies, sleep in exchange our first day of Christmas gifts and then spend the afternoon in the theater.

The last couple of years have been pretty huge disappointments.

Last year, obviously, theaters weren't open.

But the year before that... we got tickets to *Holmes & Watson*, the Will Ferrell/John C Reilly collaboration.

Those guys have made some very funny movies - Anchorman and Step-Brothers, just to name a couple. And I loooove Sherlock Holmes, so I was ready to laugh until I cried.

I still remember when the credits rolled on the movie. Amanda looked over at me - who had not laughed once for 2 straight hours - and said, "I'm sorry, my love."

I wouldn't know it until a day later, but the film had a 0% on RottenTomatoes. Everyone hated this movie. It was aggressively unfunny. Absolutely terrible.

It's probably the most disappointed I've been on Christmas in a long time.

What about you? Can you think of a time you've felt disappointment connected to Christmas? Maybe as a kid it's a gift you were really hoping for that never showed up. Or one that *did* show up and, when it did, it was... just okay. (Or, as a parent, you got your kid that thing and then the next day you find it abandoned under the couch.)

But maybe your disappointments are sharper. Maybe there's a person who won't be celebrating with us this year and you feel their absence. A relationship you were sure would be mended that's still broken. Or maybe you can't believe we're about to celebrate another COVID Christmas.

If there's a gap between where Christmas actually is and where you hoped it would be, then you're not alone.

In fact, the Advent season invites us to rejoin our spiritual ancestors in a long grappling with their disappointment with God. What we'll see today is that God is present with us, active and working to bring good and joy. God meets us in our disappointment and invites us to hope!

### ADVENT READING

## Message

Today is the second 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.

Last week, we began with hope, the image of a single flame burning in the darkness. We explored hope as the persistent conviction that God is up to something new, bringing light into the world.

Today, we lit another candle, bringing a little more light into the world. It's worth pausing to reflect on light. Because we sort of default to assuming light is a good thing - Christmas lights are one of the main decorations we put up this time of year!

But when it comes to Advent light, we're talking specifically about fire - candlelight. Fire is wonderful - especially in a pre-industrial world where it was our only source of light at night. Fire ran our forges and created new, strong metals that made it possible to farm quicker, cook better and generally improve life.

But fire is also deadly. In fact, the very property that makes it effective for cooking and refining metal and more is what makes it so dangerous - heat.

A fire that's only burning at 100 degrees won't burn you. But do you want to eat chicken that's only been heated to 100 degrees?

Of course not. That fire's not hot enough to kill the impurities.

Wanna guess how much money gold that has been refined at 100 degrees is worth?

Yeah... not much. Because the heat isn't strong enough to burn away the impurities.

Fire. Hot enough to purify means hot enough to burn.

If there's any safe place to admit that the Christmas season brings up a mixture of emotions, it's at church. If there's any place we can say that in addition to the joy and cheer there's grief and stress and anxiety, then it's surely it's here, right?

We can ask: am I sure I'm really ready for Christmas? Am I sure I'm ready for Jesus to arrive? Am I sure I'm ready for God?

Turn with us to [Malachi 3](#).

Malachi was a prophet for God's people in the years after the Exile. In fact, his whole ministry was just after the Exiles were allowed to return home.

Now, let's set the scene: Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, destroyed God's temple and forcibly deported all their leaders. But that didn't last forever. 70 years later, they returned home.

Imagine that after 70 years, that thing you've been waiting for comes to pass. 100 years after the worst thing in your history, it's going to be made right.

But then... it happens and... it's not great.

It's okay! But... the priests who run the new temple are probably corrupt. And the king... well he's not *really* a king, more of a puppet monarch and he's fine, I guess? Certainly no David.

And it's not like when the Exiles returned, the land was empty. There were thousands of people still living there... the descendants of all the regular people who *didn't* get exiled. And they had been getting along, doing their own thing all that time. You can imagine they weren't exactly thrilled that a whole mess of people showed up expecting to run everything. After all, the people who *got* exiled were the leaders - the nobles and priests. And these are their kids and grandkids. So *of course* they e

Malachi speaks to a culture of people who are deeply divided, a people who waited decades for a reality that, once it arrived, was... just okay.

I can't tell you how much that feels like getting the COVID vaccine to me... after more than a year of lockdown and fighting, the vaccine finally arrived... only to find a world where we still have to wear masks, people are divided over it and it still doesn't seem like there's an end in sight. The election didn't fix anything, the vaccine didn't fix anything... it's enough to make you want to throw up your hands and say, "Really, God? Is this it?!"

If that resonates with you, then you know how the people Malachi spoke to felt. They wondered when God was going to judge their enemies and restore their fortunes.

It's into this mess that Malachi speaks. And he asks a profound question: "God is on the way. Are you sure you're ready?"

Let's read:

"Look! I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to his Temple. The messenger of the covenant, whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming," says the Lord of Heaven's Armies." -- Malachi 3:1 (NLT)

Good news, right? God's on the way. You're not crazy. It's happening soon. So. Good news.

Right?

...Right?

"But who will be able to endure it when he comes? Who will be able to stand and face him when he appears? For he will be like a blazing fire that refines metal, or like a strong soap that bleaches clothes. He will sit like a refiner of silver, burning away the dross. He will purify the Levites, refining them like gold and silver, so that they may once again offer acceptable sacrifices to the Lord. Then once more the Lord will accept the offerings brought to him by the people of Judah and Jerusalem, as he did in the past." -- Malachi 3:2-4 (NLT)

Who could possibly endure the Lord's coming? It's not a rhetorical question. Malachi says out loud what the people have been whispering in their hearts:

They're not ready for God to arrive. They're not, as we used to say growing up, "right with God." And they *know* it. They look around and say, "This isn't how God wants us to be. This isn't how God created us to be."

To use a really simplistic metaphor, it's like you're in charge of the staff Christmas party. You know the boss is coming and you haven't done *anything* to get ready.

And Malachi tells them what they already know: God is light. God is the kind of light that reveals all the impurities. God is the kind of light that burns away impurities.

Which is good news if you live in an impure world. God's arrival means justice. It means the burning away of misogyny and racism and homophobia and all other kinds of prejudice. It's the end of violence, abuse and exploitation.

Of course it's not such good news if we're part of the problem. If our lives contain those impurities. Refinement is a painful process.

So Malachi warns: are we really ready? Have we truly done the work God asks of us?

In a sense, we are in a better position to understand this Christmas message than our spiritual ancestors. They looked for a new David, a conquering king.

But we know that when God came, God came not as a king, but a baby.

They looked for God to arrive in a palace, greeted by Israel's elite.

We know that God came in a manger, born to peasants and greeted by shepherds and foreigners.

They looked for God to come conquering, to make Israel great again.

We know that when God came, God came humble and gentle, insisting that God's people would be known not by our power but our love for each other.

This is the good news of Christmas: that Jesus is Emmanuel - God with us. God came among us to show us what it looks like when God comes among us.

We don't have to wonder if we're ready for God to arrive. We know what God's arrival looks like. We don't have to wonder if the light of God's presence will reveal impurities. We have Jesus to show us the truth of who we are.

The great irony is how often we still fall back into old patterns, imagining that God is obsessed with power and status, as though when God returns, God will show up this time in power and might rather than humility and kindness. So we end up celebrating the wrong things - strength, privilege, wealth. Our preparations for Christmas can reveal much that needs to be refined.

We don't have to wonder what impurities God's presence will burn away in us. We can ask him, along with the Psalmist, to search us and know us and point out anything within us that offends God. And, unlike the Psalmist, we have God-in-the-flesh. We can look to Jesus' life to show us.

Let's step back into today. We're speeding full-tilt toward Christmas. And it's cliché to say at this point, so try to hear me:

It's easy to lose the thread of Advent. It's easy to forget that before presents and trees and lights and parties was God becoming human.

Before the hustle *or* the bustle of the holiday season was a weary world aching for God to show up, to put things right. And when God *did* that, a whole lot of those people who were waiting missed it *because they weren't prepared*.

So we should ask ourselves: are we attending to Jesus in the midst of the holiday madness? Are we still making space for the Holy Spirit to shape us? Are we continuing to go to God in prayer?

Are we ruthlessly remaining connected to the trunk that is Jesus? Or are we allowing ourselves to be swept up in all the tinsel and trappings? What would it take to create some space to read a story from the Gospels every day during this Advent season? Or to include a prayer of Examen at the beginning or end of your day.

I'm grateful our Leadership Team chose to elevate the community at Chihuahua City for our Advent offering this year. I am grateful that, by doing so, they've invited us to stretch our imaginations to encompass people we're not even friends with yet. This offering is a way for us

to hope, to expect and celebrate how God is going to change and grow Catalyst through our relationships with the people there.

We know we're going to be changed, even if we don't know how. That's Advent hope.

We celebrate now what we know is to come. That's the Advent promise.

How does your holiday preparation change if we imagine the one we anticipate is already present with us?

Are we perhaps more patient? Or more aware of

Or more gentle?

Perhaps a bit more self-controlled when we shop - even as we seek to be generous?

## Communion + Examen

We receive in anticipation of what Jesus will do.

Where have I imitated Jesus in my preparation for Christmas so far?

What impurities has God shown me that need to be refined?

How can I create space this week to be present to the Holy Spirit?

## Assignment + Blessing

Advent Examen