

Welcome

Welcome to Whamageddon! There is an unorthodox Christmas tradition of avoiding the song “Last Christmas” by Wham between the dates of December 1 and December 24.

You have been WHAM!’ed if you listen to “Last Christmas” during that time frame. The rules of the game are: 1) Go without hearing the “Last Christmas” by Wham during December 1st to 24th, 2) Cover versions or mixes of the song don’t count as being WHAM!’ed (so don’t worry - the cover didn’t count!), 3) You can’t send the song to others or play intentionally to get them out of the game, 4) You’re out of the game as soon as you hear the song. Whamageddon is now becoming a Christmas tradition, like Elf on a Shelf or watching Harry Potter movies. Is there a particular tradition you do to prepare for a particular season like Christmas? Have you felt drained or excited to partake in your traditions?

Fall is my favorite season and I love to decorate for it. This year, something strange happened to me in early November... I had a strong urge to put up my Christmas decorations. Usually I don’t do that until November 30th . My son asked me why and I realized that I had been feeling hurt and depressed. I wanted the Christmas decorations to bring a little bit of that holiday cheer and festivity early - I needed that warm fuzzy feeling coursing through my blood. He told me that it was just fine to skip the fall season.

This year has been difficult for many of us. I know that a lot of you have had a year like mine. I miss my mom very much and now for the first time have to enter the holiday season without her. It’s difficult to take part in holiday activities due to pain, loss, struggle, brokenness, or heartache. It’s heartbreaking to hear about the wars in Ukraine, between Israel and Palestine. There’s probably financial hardships with the increase in the cost of living and if you started on your student loan payments. Sometimes it seems easier to shield ourselves from these feelings. Also, many people expect you to keep these feelings hidden to avoid a grim Christmas or holiday season because it doesn’t fit in their joyous holiday vibe or the magic of Christmas. Christmas cheer offers us a way to hide from all that pain and if Christmas cheer is being used as a shield, there’s no place for us to express grief, worry, or heartache... these feelings break the magic of the holiday season.

The song “Last Christmas” isn’t your typical Christmas song. The song is about heartbreak and how one deals with rejection. The song carries this eerie tune of desire and obsession. Who knew that this song would be on the top of any Christmas playlist?

Advent insists we can do better than a cheerful facade that shields us from the real pain in the world - the real pain in our own lives.

What do we miss if we hide particular realities and emotions from this time of year? There could be a mental overload and impossible expectation to make sure everyone has a magical Christmas. You work so hard to express how much you love someone in your gift, the recipient doesn’t cherish your well thought of gift and donates it or regifts it, you find out and now this

year you find another who could possibly value your well thought out present. Also, all these online videos provide tutorials of how to transform your home for a magical Christmas - you then try a tutorial and find out that they were not very honest in how to create an amazing tree - now your over budget and it has taken much longer in the project than expected that is nowhere being done. Advent calls us to slow down and remove the illusions that have distorted this season.

Whamageddon jokes aside, "Last Christmas" is one of our most beloved Christmas songs. Could it be that we resonate with that mixture of cheerful music and mournful lyrics? Could it be that, deep down, we realize that just hiding from pain doesn't heal us? Advent invites us to consider the possibility that there is hope in the midst of real pain in the world.

We mark the season of Advent by lighting candles. These candles remind us that we are waiting for Jesus' return. This week, Stacy Jankowski is lighting our Advent candle.

Message

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, which is the beginning of the Church year. During Advent, we take four Sundays to prepare ourselves for Christmas. We prepare by remembering what our spiritual ancestors experienced as they waited for the arrival of God's promised champion.

We know that champion arrived as Jesus on that first Christmas. But we also know Jesus isn't done with the world, that he's going to return. So just like our ancestors prepared for Jesus to arrive that first Christmas, we're preparing for his return one day.

This year, our Advent series is called WORST CHRISTMAS SONGS EVER. We're taking some of the Christmas songs that get a lot of (usually justifiable!) hate and asking what we can learn from them. Why do people hate them so much? And how did they get so popular in the first place? Along the way, we'll find sitting with these songs might be an invitation to prepare our own spirits for the Christmas celebration.

We began last week with "Baby, It's Cold Outside," which reminded us that God is at work in our specific time and place to bring healing and hope. Today, we're in conversation with Wham!'s "Last Christmas," in large part because of the Whamageddon game. How long *can* we go without hearing this song?

Many of us may already have been Whammed this holiday season - it seems like some stores play Christmas music earlier and earlier each year. It's debatable when holiday music should begin playing in stores. Do I really want to hear Christmas and holiday music in November?!

It's also a debate of when Christmas and holiday decor should go up in stores as well. Some stores already had Christmas and holiday stuff on sale with Halloween stuff.

It's a bit confusing because I believe that these seasonal symbols and music announce the arrival of a specific season. We set up, decorate, and prepare prior to the occasion. We're anticipating for and getting ready for that day to come.

Advent is on the Christian calendar which announces the arrival of the new year for Christ followers. Advent season is a time opposite of our cultural calendar. Instead of being busy, expecting it only to be a happy time - Advent calls us to slow down our busy lives. It gives you permission to feel various emotions. It makes space to journey through a darkened world of suffering, death, and loss and see how the Light of the World, Jesus has overcome this darkness.

Music is great because it helps us feel different types of emotions. So the unlikeliness of Christmas music could possibly be helpful. Take the song, Last Christmas by Wham isn't very Christmas if you expect Christmas to identify with it only being holly and jolly. Last Christmas is like a psalms of Christmas - it's an honest song that captures human emotion and thought so well. The writer was honest about a difficult relationship he experienced around the holiday.

So maybe "Last Christmas" isn't a Christmas song at all... maybe it's an Advent song. One of the things I like about Advent is that the stories we read during this season seem not to fit into Christmas. These unlikely stories reveal the hope we have in Creator God. Advent is a time we are called to slow down, think, reflect, and a time to prepare ourselves for what Creator God's vision is for us, our community, and our world. We long for renewal and restoration. We look forward to the celebration of Christ's birth and what this represents, God with us. Especially when your Christmas story is as strange as Mark's, you'll see how you fit into the hope of the Christmas season.

Turn with us to Mark 1.

Mark 1 isn't what we think of as a Christmas narrative. There are no shepherds, wise men, or mother Mary. Instead, we open on a prophet named John, standing in the Jordan River and calls out to the crowds, "Prepare the way of the Lord!"

John is preparing the way for the coming of the Messiah and is speaking to a world that is hurting, losing hope and faith. John's message is out of phase with the rest of the world for his time and our time - just like the book of Mark itself. Mark doesn't follow the writing style of its time. There is no set chronological order, and the writer had no formal education.

Mark begins with John so we can see God differently through the presence of Jesus. When we read the book, we join those on the banks of the Jordan, listening to John. Like them, John calls us to know who Jesus is and the special relationship Jesus has with God. Mark challenges us to think about concerns we have as society and how that compares to Jesus' character, action, and words.

So let's listen to John's Christmas message:

“It began just as the prophet Isaiah had written: ‘Look, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, and he will prepare your way. He is a voice shouting in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD’s coming! Clear the road for him!’”

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 1:1b-8, NLT)

Mark’s story begins with this calling out, “Prepare the way! Clear the road!” This type of preparation isn’t a frantic, last minute, emotionally exhausting, or spiritually empty preparation. In order to hear John, people had to break from their daily routines and go out into the desert. John’s preaching focuses on repentance, forgiveness of sins, baptism, and greater things to come.

I would have never thought to start the Advent journey towards Christmas with the act of repentance. The act of repenting requires us to look at ourselves - in turn the forgiveness of sin allows for restoration to occur. John calls the people to journey out to the wilderness and to take part in repentance and forgiveness of sins. They act out that repentance by receiving baptism, allowing the waters of the Jordan to cleanse them from all that separated them from God. They emerge from the waters redeemed and ready to welcome God’s reign, ready to participate in God’s mission of redemption and reconciliation through Jesus.

Does any of that sound like a hurried rush to Christmas day, to Bethlehem to see the birth of a newborn king? John the Baptizer prepares us to meet Christ and invites *us* to prepare God’s way. Mark’s story about Jesus and the season of Advent calls us to abandon the typical Christmas idea we have become accustomed to and how we have been conditioned to get ready for a worldly Christmas.

Advent is a push back against the darkness of individual and communal sin. Advent calls us to confess our personal and collective sins and brings about salvation for us as individuals and as a community. Salvation is a healing and renewal balm for us for God to dwell in our midst. We sing often during this season for Immanuel to come and dwell in our midst. We long for Immanuel to teach us the ways to go forward in love and knowledge. We long for Immanuel’s victory over death, to dispel darkness, and to remove all the divisions between nations. Let us sing for a new pattern and the hope to recognize God’s spirit in our midst.

SONG

The site of Christmas in Mark is in the wilderness, in the vicinity of the Jordan River. The wilderness is a symbol of where Israel rebelled against God. The water of the Jordan River symbolizes the transformation of life away from uncleanness to a cleansing and forgiveness that God's spirit brings. The attire of Christmas is of a desert nomad wearing camel hair and a leather belt. It's the origin of the Ugly Christmas sweater tradition. The words of the desert nomad are to all the people, the entire region that God is in their midst and the one who they've been waiting for is near.

Preparation for Christmas could be overwhelming. We do a lot to make this season magical, joyous, and festive. We don't want any Scrooges or Grinches to ruin what we worked so hard to create. We'd rather them join our side of the festivities and happiness.

The author of Mark shows a different way of preparation for people to take part in as they await the coming of Jesus. The author shows us a time honored way our spiritual ancestors prepared for Christmas.

“[John] 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. (Mark 1:4-5, NLT)

John carrying out baptisms for the Jewish community was a specific preparation for the coming of God into their midst. The forgiveness of sin is not like how it would be understood today as forgiveness of individual sins. The act of forgiveness of sin was a communal purification process. This preparation was for the people to be God's holy people. John pours upon the people God's Spirit and for them to begin a new pattern of life with Emmanuel, God with us to dwell.

Starting with repentance is a deliberate preparation for the Advent journey towards Christmas. We accept responsibility for our offenses individually and communally - we confess sins, hurt, brokenness, pain, and injury. In asking for God's forgiveness of sin is not forgetting or excusing - it is allowing God to pour out the Spirit among us all, for God to dwell in our midst, and for us to live out being the holy people of God. Being the holy people of God is to work towards healing, solidarity and liberation for all.

A way the world tells us to prepare for Christmas is to spend money to create a perfect magical Christmas and to shop in order to find the perfect gift. The world's Christmas is ignoring or suppressing for the sake of cheer, happiness, and joy. John reveals a different Christmas. John's way to prepare for Christmas is by repenting. Repentance requires honest self-reflection. It's the opposite of hiding. John points the way to Jesus and how God has arrived to the world to bring the promise of hope and freedom. We must now reflect on this Advent season of how we

should get ready for Christmas. We can do that because the Lord who is coming is good and loving. We can trust.

Communion + Examen

How am I preparing spiritually during this Advent season?

Where do I find myself hiding from or avoiding God?

How can I trust God in my preparations this week?

Prayer