

Message Notes December 6th, 2020
Advent Week 2: Prepare
(Isaiah 40:1-11, Mark 1:1-8, 2 Peter 3:8-15)

- **Happy Christian New Year**

- How many of you are looking forward to the New Year, 2021? What if I put it this way: *how many of you are looking forward to the end of 2020?* Well, I have good news for you: for Christians, the New Year has already begun! The New *calendar* Year may begin on January 1st, but have you ever thought about the fact that, for the Church, the New Year begins a month earlier? In “Church Time,” the first Sunday of Advent is the beginning of our New Year.
 - For us, the celebration of Advent marks a new beginning, renewing the rhythms of our spiritual journey as we think about the bigger Story of God’s salvation
- When you think about it, every story has three parts: the beginning, the middle, and the end. Advent is a time for us to remember where we are in God’s Story and where it’s all headed.
 - J.D. Walt writes, “*With the first Advent of Jesus Christ, the Story shifted from a miry middle to a new beginning—the beginning of the end. We now find ourselves awaiting [Jesus’] coming again when he will bring the new creation. And so we begin again, in a brand new year, with clear vision and renewed hope, somewhere in the middle of the beginning of the end.*”
 - There you have it: some 2,000 years from the entrance of Christ into human history, here we stand in 2020, entering another New Year, somewhere *in the middle of the beginning of the end.*

- **Maranatha**

- This brings us to a wonderful word that you might have never heard before. It’s one of the very oldest recorded prayers of the Church, an Aramaic word: “*Maranatha.*” It simply means, “Come, Lord,” *Come, Lord Jesus.* It shows up once in 2 Corinthians and it’s echoed at the very end of the Bible in Revelation 22, which says, “*The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let the one who hears say, ‘Come!’...He who testifies to these things says, ‘Yes, I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.*”
 - The Latin word, *Adventus*, means the same thing: “Come.” This is the meaning of Advent: “*Come, Lord Jesus.*”
 - Christ has come and Christ is coming again. Those who know Him wait here, in the middle of the beginning of the end, looking around at the suffering and hurting and evil that still lingers in the present age, and we continue to pray, just as the early Christians did, “Come, Lord Jesus, come soon.”
- Too often, during Advent, we focus only on that *first* coming of Jesus and all the wonderful scenes of the Nativity. But the key part of Advent for us should be anticipating the *second coming* of Jesus.
 - We’re meant to look back on that first Advent—with all the waiting and suffering and longing leading up to the astounding moment of Promise fulfilled—in order to realize that we too are in a season of waiting, of exile, of longing for a Promise to be fulfilled: *He promised to come back.*
 - We are in the middle of the end, waiting for Jesus to return and bring the fullness of His Kingdom. Advent is a time to reflect and to *be ready.* As we look around this broken world in this broken time, rather than wallow in despair, we’re meant to pray with longing, *Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus.*
 - And while no one knows the exact day or hour, we do know that with each day, we get closer to that Day. John Eldredge said, if the Disciples themselves were living in the “last days,” by now we must be living in the “last minutes,” maybe even the “last seconds.” Advent is to focus our hearts again on one thing: *be ready.*
 - In the next few weeks leading up to Christmas, we’ll focus on three words for Advent: *Prepare, Rejoice, and Promise.* Today’s word is *Prepare.*

- **Prepare**

- Now, think back with me to all that led up to the first coming of Jesus, with everything the Israelites went through in their years of rebellion, exile, captivity, and oppression.

- In that place of exile, in a strange and cruel land, this prophesy of Isaiah 40 came to them with the voice of one calling in the wilderness: *“Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together...The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever...See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm...he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.”*
- The wilderness that separated the exiled people of God from their true home was vast: 900 miles. 900 miles from Jerusalem to Babylon. 900 miles the captives were led, from all they knew, by cruel oppressors, to a strange place from where none of that generation would return. They had forfeited the dream of God and the promise of God for their nation by their continued rebellion, and God gave them over to their enemies to be broken down that they might one day be restored.
- 900 miles of wilderness from a home that had been destroyed. For us, roughly speaking, that would be a journey by foot from here across to Minnesota, or from here down to Florida. Imagine that journey through desert wilderness, by foot. There was no way to get back and there was nothing to go back to. Imagine the hopelessness.
- For many, these past 9 months of Pandemic have felt a little like 900 miles of wilderness, where we’ve been forced to forfeit the familiar and live in strange ways, in isolation, longing for freedom.
 - But there will come a time, eventually, when we’ll return to something like what we knew. And still, we’ll be living in this awkward, “already but not yet,” beginning of the end period of time, in a world that is still broken, still groaning, a world where there will still be sickness and war. And even at the time when the Pandemic ends, we’ll still be praying, “Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus.”
 - And the people of God in Babylon eventually returned to their homeland in Israel to rebuild what had been lost. But they found it wasn’t the same as it had been, and they longed for the greater fulfillment of the promises to Israel. They longed for that coming King of the line of David to setup the everlasting Kingdom. And they still were oppressed by surrounding nations, year after year. And they still struggled with similar temptations and rebellions, year after year.
- Into that awkward waiting, in the days when the Roman Empire were the new oppressors, the Voice came crying out in the wilderness again.
 - Mark’s Gospel says that Christ’s first Advent went like this: *“The beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, as it is written in Isaiah the prophet: ‘I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way’—‘a voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River...And this was his message: ‘After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’”*
- **Two Voices**
 - We can still hear that voice, if we listen. We’re meant to hear that voice all the clearer in the Advent season. But there’s another voice, or maybe more accurately, a *noise*, coming from society. The voice of the world, the voice of the “empire,” that tells us we should prepare for the holidays by feeding the unquenchable desires and distractions of the marketplace: distract yourself with more stuff, scratch every itch, numb the pain. It’s a voice that calls us into the world with the artificial light of comforts and distractions.
 - But the ancient Voice, heard through the prophet Isaiah and John the Baptist, calls us out. The Holy Spirit calls us out into the wilderness, into the frontier, into the adventure that stands between where we are and where God wants us to be: “Prepare the way of the Lord.”
 - And if our hearts are right with Him, we’ll respond, “Amen, Come Lord Jesus.” The problem is, we get out of alignment and we tune the Voice out.

- And that's why we're called, especially in Advent, to a season of *repentance*. Repent means, *change your heart, change your mind, turn around, become aligned once again with God—the only one who can really give us life.*
- Repent, turn around, come back to God until, when you hear the voice saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord," your heart cries out with it, "Maranatha, Come, Lord Jesus."
- **The Beginning of All Things New**
 - We procrastinate and we avoid thinking about that second Advent of Jesus, because it's uncomfortable to think about all that change and to think about the end of things as we know it.
 - Reading 2 Peter 3 in the season of Christmas seems so awkward and intense in the context of our happy, Christmas radio songs: *"...the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare...That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells."*
 - I just can't find a way to make that into a good Christmas song! I can't hear Alvin and the Chipmunks singing that one!
 - Here's what we fail to realize, though: the end that is coming with the Advent of King Jesus *is but the end of all things broken and the beginning of all things new.* This is what we really long for and what we really need! *For evil to be finished forever and for all that is good to be restored.*
 - To quote J.D. Walt again, he says: *"It's time we come to terms with this fact: the return of the Lord is a good thing...Think about it. The return of the Lord means no more child slavery. No more sex trade. No more cancer. No more drug addiction. No more tears. No more terrorism. No more war. No more starvation. No more wheelchairs. The sheen of newness everywhere...[the glory of the Lord and] gladness...filling the earth as the waters cover the sea."*
 - When we prepare for the next Advent of Jesus, we're preparing for the end of all things broken and the beginning of all things new. So, *are you ready? Prepare the way of the Lord.*
 - With all of this being said: by all means, friends, *celebrate Christmas!* Preparing for His return doesn't mean we become Scrooges or Grinches—it's just the opposite! Find some joy, make some joy, give some joy. Enjoy the signs of the season and bless them in the name of Jesus! 1 Timothy 6 says that God, *"richly provides everything for our enjoyment."*
 - Celebrate and enjoy. But don't make it the main thing; don't let it keep you from the most important work of the season: *Prepare.*
 - *Are you ready for Jesus? Are you ready for the King to come?*
 - I want to invite you, this week, as you spend time with God in prayer and Scripture (yes, that's a shameless plug for 5 to Thrive!), reflect on this simple question: "This Advent, how does God want me to prepare the way for Jesus?"
 - Let me say that again, and maybe you want to write it down: *This Advent, how does God want me to prepare the way for Jesus?*
 - The answer might come in the form of personal, internal work God wants to do in your heart. Or the answer might come in the form of external work God wants you to do in your relationships and in the world around you.
 - However it comes out, keep asking, *"How does God want me to prepare the way for Jesus?"*
 - And from now on, along with "Mer-ry Christmas! And Happy New Year!" I want to start saying, "Mar-anatha! Happy Advent!" Are you with me? Let's pray.