

A
LIGHT
IN THE
DARK

Daily Devotions for Advent 2019
Week One

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In the weeks before Christmas, Christians all over the world observe the season of Advent as a time of spiritual preparation for the birth of Christ. It is a time to ponder the meaning of the embodiment of God's love in Christ, and to meditate on how we might receive him in our own lives. We offer this devotional in the hope that it might bless you and nourish your own awareness of the presence of God during this special season.

In the Gospel of John, the Word (Christ) is described as the true light from God that shines in the darkness. And in the book of Psalms, we read that the Word of God is "a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path." This devotional takes inspiration from these scriptures, taking shape around four words that relate to the themes of Advent and Christmas: Come, Listen, Wonder, and Sing.

I pray that these four words, and the words that flow from them, may bring you ever closer to the Word of God, which dispels the darkness and brings life to all people.

Christ's peace be with you.

-Jonathan Hauze

Come

DECEMBER 1

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
before the Lord; for he is coming,
for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

(Psalm 96:11-13)

A new season begins today. Not winter, but Advent, from the Latin “to come.” You are not likely to find any traces of Advent in the stores. A season traditionally associated with prayer and fasting is not exactly easy to market. “Elf on a Shelf” has become a perennial favorite, but I can’t see “Prophet in the Pantry” selling very well. As much fun as it would be to surprise the kids, first thing in the morning, with a wild-eyed, bearded doll perched atop their cereal box.

It’s not just the stores. Advent is a tough sell for all of us. Christmas is so much more *comfortable*. To gather around a newborn baby, lying in a manger, is a perfectly cozy thought. To attend to the thunderous warning of an ancient holy man, not so much. I for one would certainly prefer to sip my cocoa, listen to Bing Crosby, and entertain myself with visions of sugarplums.

Maybe this is exactly why we *need* Advent. To jolt us out of our nostalgic daze and remind us of the majesty and grandeur of the divine. What does it mean to say, “Behold, the day of the Lord is near”? Are they just the faint echo of a former age, or do we trust that the Holy One is truly drawing near to us? What does it stir in us, when we think of God coming near? If it does not make our hearts quiver and our spirits shake, that’s a sure sign that we could use a little old-school Advent in our lives. A little less time on Facebook, a little more time on our knees. A little less time worrying about how many shopping days we have, a little more time pondering who God is calling us to be.

The psalmist reminds us, “he is coming . . . he is coming to judge the earth . . .” This is serious stuff. But I am reminded of the conversation that the Pevensie children have with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* when they discover that Aslan is not a man but a lion. “Is he-quite safe?” Susan asks. “I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.” Mr. Beaver replies, “Safe? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the king, I tell you.”

-Pastor Jonathan

Wondrous God, help me to stay awake and remain attentive to your teachings, that I may not be distracted from the things that matter most to you. Amen.

Come

DECEMBER 2

‘But know this: if the owner of the house had known at what hour the thief was coming, he would not have let his house be broken into. You also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.’

-*Luke 12:39-40*

Keeping awake is one of the major themes of Advent. Just a few verses before these strange words in which he compares himself to a thief in the night, Jesus instructs his disciples to “be dressed for action and have your lamps lit.” This is bad news for me. I am a champion sleeper. Liza likes to tell about the time that she heard the kids, who were supposed to be getting ready for bed, whooping it up and having a grand old time. She knew that I had gone upstairs with them to keep them on track, so she went upstairs to discover why I was not at my post. She found me fast asleep in the hallway, face down on the floor. I had grown tired of waiting.

I take comfort in knowing that Jesus could sleep with the best of them. He was the one, you may remember, who was fast asleep in the boat when the wind and the waves began to trouble the disciples. This is a sign that perhaps the call to ‘keep awake’ is not meant to be taken literally, as though God wants us to punish our bodies in order to save our souls. He doesn’t, and it won’t. I think that Jesus is talking about the attentiveness of our spirits to the presence of God. Are we living a wakeful, expectant life? Do we expect to meet God at any moment? In any person?

You must be ready, Jesus says, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour. There is more than a hint of warning here – keep on your toes! – but I don’t really hear this in a negative or threatening tone. Instead I am reminded of the parable that Jesus tells toward the end of the Gospel of Matthew, in which the king surprises the people by revealing that they have met him before. They knew him as a hungry man, and they gave him food – or they didn’t. They knew him as a prisoner, and they visited him – or they didn’t. They knew him as a stranger, and they welcomed him – or they didn’t. Neither those who honored him nor those who rejected him had any idea that he was in their midst. He came at an unexpected hour – and in an unfamiliar form.

Perhaps those with wakeful hearts will not be so surprised to see him in the faces of our neighbors. And just in case we don’t see, might as well strive to be a servant of all, so that we will not miss any opportunity to worship the king.

-Pastor Jonathan

God of surprises, keep me humble and help me to guard against making assumptions about people. Chasten and check my prejudices, that they may not prevent me from meeting Christ in the lives of others. Amen.

Come

DECEMBER 3

‘Come to me, all you that are weary
and are carrying heavy burdens,
and I will give you rest.’

-Matthew 11:28

It’s not always a good thing to hear the words “come here.” Especially when your full name – Jonathan *Immanuel* Hauze! – precedes them. Most especially when they’re rounded out with the words “this minute.” It’s been a few years since I’ve been on the receiving end of such a summons. But I remember what it felt like. I remember the urge to run the other way. I remember the dread in the pit of my stomach. I remember the choice words that I wanted to say out loud but didn’t -- because I knew that doing so would only get me into more trouble. Ah, the joys of being a rambunctious child!

Once we reach adulthood, we may not have to worry about hearing this particular combination of syllables. But we’re all accountable to somebody. And it’s never a fun experience. Sometimes it can be healthy and contribute to our character, such as when a trusted friend or mentor calls us out on something and helps us to correct a wrong that we didn’t even see – or that we saw and were too proud to admit. But there are also times when the summons is not ‘righteous,’ when it has more to do with axe-grinding or personalities than with honesty and humanity. When the boss calls and says, “we need to talk,” you can’t always count on it being an earnest and edifying experience. More likely, it will be wearying. Such as when your boss tells you that the company is streamlining things so that everything will be more efficient, but what he’s really saying is that you are now going to be doing two jobs for the same amount of pay . . .

When Jesus says, “come to me,” he invites us to walk *with* him. This is a deliberate contrast to the scribes, Pharisees, and other experts in religious law, who “tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others.” This seems to refer to a view of life in which people are constantly anxious about whether they are worthy before God, asking fearfully at every turn, ‘am I doing enough to earn God’s approval?’ Every generation, including our own, sees religious leaders who take advantage of people’s insecurities for their own personal glory or gain. Jesus doesn’t want anybody’s credit card number. He asks that we give our hearts to God. In a seeming paradox, he teaches us to take up our own cross in order to follow him. But – I may be wrong – the cross is not meant to be a burden. It is the cost of discipleship, the byproduct of a life that is lived in love, mercy, and faith. And there is no fear in such a life. Instead, there is rest even on the road to Calvary, because with every step we have the blessed assurance that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.

-Pastor Jonathan

Forgive me, God, for the fear that keeps me standing at a distance from the One who calls me into discipleship. Give me the courage to trust him, and the wisdom to know that his call, and his cross, lead not to death but to life. Amen.

Come

DECEMBER 4

‘Come and see.’ *-John 1:39*

The Bible is a book of journeys. Abram leaves his father’s house and travels into the unknown, where he receives a new name and an eternal covenant with God. Jacob runs away in fear after swindling his brother, and the resulting journey brings him visions of heaven, the blessing of an angel, and, finally, reconciliation. Joseph goes to Egypt against his will, and his sojourn there becomes the means by which his people are delivered from hunger. Moses, a murderer on the lam, comes out of hiding to confront Pharaoh and lead his people through the wilderness to the promised land. Naomi journeys to Moab with her family, where she loses her husband and sons but gains a daughter, Ruth, whose steadfast love becomes an example of faith for generations of God’s people. In all these stories, God is found on the road that leads away from home. Or, rather, God *finds us* there.

It is no accident that the ministry of Jesus begins with an invitation to come away with him. Want to know what he is about? Want to understand the good news that he bears? You can’t find the answer in a book. Not even in the Good Book, if you aren’t willing to follow where he leads. In order to see, you first have to come. One of the most challenging things about Christian discipleship is that this journey is not meant to be a temporary departure from what is well known and comfortable, but a new state of life in which the ‘road’ becomes our spiritual home. This is one reason why the early Christians, before the word ‘Christian’ was invented, referred to their faith as being ‘on the Way.’

To follow Jesus is to be a sojourner, a pilgrim, a wayfarer. As soon as we grow comfortable where we are, satisfied with what we have found, we quench the Spirit within us, which “blows where it wills.” This is the conviction at the heart of the famous U2 song, “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For.” This song is not, as it may seem to the uninitiated ear, about trying and failing to find spiritual fulfillment in Christ. Instead, it’s a celebration of the journey, of the promise that to be at home with Jesus is to be on the road with him, coming ever closer to God, ever growing, ever learning, being constantly shaped and re-shaped according to the grace given us.

As creatures of comfort, this is a hard teaching. This very moment I am sitting in a warm, well-lit kitchen that smells of mulled cider and freshly baked bread. I like this place very much, and I can almost say that I would like to stay here forever. I can even see God in this place. But not for long, I think, if I choose to stay here. Here there are no strangers to meet, no risks to be taken, no new loves to learn. Those can only be found on the road with Jesus. I can only see if I first follow.

-Pastor Jonathan

When my door of my heart is locked, and my lights are off, and I am entirely too comfortable and cozy, O God, I pray that you will come to disturb my dreams. Amen.

Come

DECEMBER 5

‘I will not leave you orphaned;
I am coming to you.
In a little while the world will no longer see me,
but you will see me.’

-John 14:13

We don't often think of Jesus as an ironist, but there are many verses, especially in the Gospel of John, where we see an undeniable preference for paradox. Perhaps the greatest example of this is his teaching that life is born of death: “those who love their life lose it.” Here we have another seeming contradiction, as Jesus describes his impending death and departure by saying that “I am coming to you.” What can this mean? How can a person come and go at the same time?

Curiously, a few chapters later Jesus will say the same thing when he is praying to the Father:

And now I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves.

Strange as they may sound to our linear minds, these statements are not meant to confuse us. They are meant, I think, to engender courage and hope. Not in the way that we sometimes seek to assuage children by offering a ‘comforting’ word that is really a falsehood cloaked in care, such as when we say “everything is going to be alright” or “nothing bad is going to happen” at a fearful time when we are just as scared as they are. Can we dare to imagine that Jesus does not merely seek to comfort us in this way, but that he speaks truth? For this promise that his death will lead to his most profound ‘coming’ is at the heart of the Christian faith in the Holy Spirit. Before his death and resurrection, Jesus of Nazareth walks beside his disciples and empowers them with speech and touch. Now, the risen Christ abides in the innermost being of his disciples, filling them with his presence and power, restoring and renewing them from within.

Our Advent waiting is not a time of emptiness. Darkness may surround us, and it may cast shadows over our own hearts from time to time, telling us that we are fools to hope. But within us shines a light that is the life of Christ himself, whose resurrection reminds us that “hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.” (Romans 5:5)

-Pastor Jonathan

God, open my eyes to perceive your nearness. Let me abide in you, as you abide in me. Amen.

Come

DECEMBER 6

Your kingdom come. *-Matthew 6:10*

More than 2,000 years on, we are still praying with the words that Jesus taught his disciples to say. More or less: the Lord's Prayer that we say today is really a mash-up of the two versions in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, with an added flourish at the end. In all three versions – Matthew's, Luke's, and ours – the first petition consists of three simple words. "Your kingdom come." I wonder, after two millennia, if we still understand how strange and beautiful it is to pray for such a thing? Even (or especially?) as a pastor, it is easy to let a traditional prayer become a rote exercise in recitation. It's sort of like driving somewhere you have driven every day for 10 or 20 years: you don't even have to think about it anymore, because the car just knows where to go. You can even do it with a wandering mind, and arrive at your destination without really remembering how you got there. I think that everyone can agree that this kind of inattention is a dangerous thing when you're behind the wheel of a car. How about when you're saying a prayer?

The theologian Karl Barth, from the twentieth century, helps us to recover a sense of awe about these words:

The prayer which this King himself has laid on the lips of Christians . . . surpasses . . . all other possibilities of human revolt against disorder . . . As Christians call upon God with this petition, they do what is qualitatively more and better than the best that all other movements for the establishment of human righteousness can do, their own efforts included. If only they knew what a task and what power were entrusted to them when as the children of God they are freed and summoned to hasten to their Father with this prayer to him! If only they knew what a debt they incur to him and themselves and the whole world which they have to represent with this petition if they neglect to do this! If only they knew finally with what profoundest rest and joy they can withstand the inner and outer assaults of the course of the world with all the things that are so unseemly and intolerable and monstrous in it, looking ahead to its end and goal, when they do not grow indolent and slothful but persist cheerfully and industriously in the by no means heroic action of praying, "Thy kingdom come."

Barth is not naïve about the difference between saying a prayer and performing an action. He writes these words amid the ruins left behind by the Second World War. Which is exactly why, perhaps, he wants to emphasize the priority of God's kingdom over the establishment of any human righteousness. Even the best human revolts against disorder are bathed in brokenness and bloodshed. To pray for the coming of the kingdom is to be humbled by the recognition that we will never be our own saviors. The perfect world of our striving and imagining still falls far short. It is God's kingdom for which we pray. It is God's kingdom for which we wait.

-Pastor Jonathan

Help me to pray in sincerity, God, that my prayers may change me – and the world. Amen.

Listen

DECEMBER 7

“Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

-1 Kings 19:11-12

These verses come from the well-known story of the prophet Elijah, as he waits to confer with God on the mountaintop. At this point in his journey the prophet is exhausted and demoralized. He has been victorious in battle – in those days, prophets carried swords, not unlike the wizard Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* books – but he is losing the war. At least, that’s how he feels. Alone. Bitter. Bereft of hope. Now he waits for a word from the Lord, and the manner in which God speaks may be a hint about the problem with being a prophet who relies too much on the sword. Notice that the Lord is not present in any of these magnificent and frightening expressions of power that human beings might consider befitting a mighty warrior-prophet. Instead, God is finally revealed in a sound that can barely be heard. The King James translation is even better here: “after the fire a still small voice.”

This text has been understood in a million different ways, but this time of year it especially speaks to me as a reminder of the surprising way that God’s glory is revealed in Jesus. The oppressed Israelites were waiting for a mighty warrior, somebody like Elijah who carried a sword and knew how to use it. Who expected God to be revealed as a helpless baby from a poor family in a backwater town? In the beginning of the Gospel of John, one of the first disciples voices this disbelief when he asks outright, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

One of the challenges of faith is that we are called to listen for that which we might not expect. And sometimes, for that which we might not understand. After all, God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. To listen faithfully, therefore, requires a fair amount of patient humility. We wait not for a bolt of lightning, or for an ‘answer’ to *our* prayer, but for God to speak in the way in which God chooses to speak. It might not be what we want to hear – in this text, God is about to tell Elijah that it’s time for him to retire – but it *is* a divine word, which means that it is given for our good, not for our harm.

Maybe this text can inspire you, this Advent, to consider how it is that you listen for God in your life. On your own terms, with your own designs, or with a true openness of spirit to receive what God would give? Don’t fret if it seems hard – it’s the work of a lifetime, not just a season. But it is entirely worthwhile, if it helps us even a tiny little bit to listen for that blessed voice that is not our own.

-Pastor Jonathan

Help me to listen for you, O God, and to let go of whatever ideas I have about what you are going to say before you say it. Amen.