

Until Then
Jeremiah 33: 14-16

Although we typically think of January 1st as New Year's Day, the beginning of the Christian year begins with the First Sunday of Advent. Happy New Year! If you are like me, around this time every year I begin to realize just how quickly the days in all of those new years have passed us by. Christmas is less than 4 weeks away and 2022 will soon be here. Even though the date remains the same, it seems that Christmas arrives earlier every year, and the decorations seem to go up even sooner than the year before. As we move farther away in time from that wondrous miracle in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago, Christmas has become more and more about shopping and less and less about the birth of the Messiah. I think I am safe in saying Black Friday generates more excitement than the four Sundays of Advent and Christmas combined! Hopefully we have paid off our credit cards from last Christmas so we can start over again now. It's called Black Friday because it refers to positive profits many retailers expect to make. It sure seems like the world has turned the celebration of the birth of Christ into the biggest shopping season of the year.

Much like lent is a season of preparation for Good Friday and Easter, Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas. We need to be prepared for two reasons. December 25 will be here before we know it, and the Day of the Lord can come at any moment. Even though it has more days than February, December seems like the shortest month of the year. Most of us are already thinking about all of the things we need to do before then. There is so much to do even those of us with the best memories will have to make lists. There will be grocery lists and cookie lists. We'll make lists of people we have to buy for, lists of places and events we have to go to and lists of people we have to send cards to. When we are done with those lists, we might even make a list of people we actually want to buy for, and a list of places we actually want to go to and a list of people we actually want to send cards to.

We do want to be prepared, because Christmas only comes around once every 365 days and we want everything to look, smell and taste perfect- or at least better than our neighbors. As the song writer said this is truly the most wonderful time of the year. But perhaps we should change that to say that it should be the most wonderful time of the year.

I say that because the Advent and Christmas season has evolved from a peaceful time in which we joyfully celebrate the gift of God's love to one of the most hectic and stressful seasons of the year. I invite you to make a conscious effort to make this year different.

Advent is the season in which we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. Even so, His birth is only a small part of the whole celebration. If we are not careful, we will miss the significance of the 4 Sundays of Advent and allow this special time to pass us right by. The English word Advent comes from the Latin verb *advenire*, which means "to come toward, to draw near, to approach." **Advent is not a noun but a verb- an action.**

We might assume it is a time in which we focus our attention on our drawing near to God, but the reality is that the opposite is true. Advent is a celebration of God has drawing near to us rather than our efforts to draw nearer to Him. For the next four weeks we will celebrate and remember how God has revealed and made Himself known to us in the past, present, and future. The Scripture texts we read, the hymns we sing, and the prayers we offer all center around God's grace and mercy as He chose to become one of us.

The birth of Christ changed the world forever and has long been considered to be the dividing point of world history. The years in our calendar are noted as BC, meaning before Christ and AD- which is short for the Latin phrase "anno domini" which means "in the year of our Lord." Since His birth, we have been living "in the year of our Lord." God not only made Himself known, but He chose to dwell with His people here on earth. **God drew near to us in the past, bridging the expanse between heaven and earth through the birth of His Son Christ.**

That means that the birth of Christ is not just the dividing point of world history, but a "turning point" in human history, much like His death and resurrection were. The Scriptures reveal that **Jesus Christ is the One that truly separates the "old" from the "new."** The OT chronicles the fallen world before the birth of Christ and the NT reveals God's divine plan to redeem it, a divine revelation of the details surrounding the birth of Christ, the events that followed and what lies ahead. In its entirety, the Bible is a faithful and accurate account of Jesus changing the world, past, present, and future.

History and the past can never be completely erased, but that doesn't stop people from trying. There has been some success in removing Christ from Christmas, and well as from our calendars. We are told that it is no longer politically correct to use the terms BC and AD. In much of academia, those terms have now been replaced with BCE and CE. What you may not know is that movement began with Adolph Hitler. In his book entitled "Hitler's Cross", Dr. Erwin Lutzer sheds some light on why.

For centuries, Germans had celebrated Christmas and Easter and Hitler wanted to reinterpret their meaning to fit his secular political ideology. Christmas was turned into a totally pagan festival; in fact, at least for the Nazi SS troops, its date was officially changed to December 21, the date of the winter solstice. Christmas carols and nativity plays were banned from the schools in 1938, and even the name Christmas was changed to "Yuletide". Crucifixes were eliminated from the classrooms, and Easter was turned into a holiday that heralded the arrival of spring. Some of those same changes would later take place here in America. Even so, Christmas remains a celebration of the birth of Christ and Easter is a celebration of His resurrection. History and the past can never be completely erased.

God continues to draw near to us today through His Holy Spirit.

Advent is a season where God continues to draw near to those who seek Him, and sometimes people like you and me are like John the Baptist- preparing the way for the Lord to come. This is a time when we should be aware of fresh opportunities to tell others the Christmas story and explain how God loved the world so much, that He sent His Son in the form of a child, changing the world forever. As the hustle and bustle and stress of the holidays take their toll, people tend to turn to God and to each other for strength and support. I encourage you to seek His guidance even more diligently in these difficult yet special times.

The past is about the birth of Christ. The present is about the conversion of the world. So what about the future? The reality is that Advent is more about preparing for Jesus return than it is about preparing to celebrate His birth. Advent is a season for preparing and praying for Christ's second coming, the ushering in of eternal righteousness and justice.

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of that time in this morning's Scripture reading. He refers to it as days of the Lord, and the day of the Lord, that time when the world will begin to be restored to the glory which God intended it. Though he is speaking directly to the divided kingdom of Israel, the ancient Israelites, the promise of peace extends to those of us in the NT church as well. We know that to be true from the words of Jesus spoken through the prophet Isaiah in 45:21-25 and in Matthew 3:9. The Branch of righteousness is Jesus Christ, a direct descendant of King David. The day is coming when every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. The prophet says the time is coming when Jerusalem will be a safe place once again. It will be a New Jerusalem- the new capital city that is to come. It or as some translations say she, will be called "The Lord our Righteousness".

2 Peter 3:10-13 gives us additional insight. It will come most unexpectedly, like a thief in the night. Advent is a season for action and a season for vigilance. **God will draw even nearer to us when Jesus returns in glory.**

But what do we do until that day comes? Righteousness and justice are either misinterpreted or seem so far away that we tend to lose hope that they are still coming. If you are in that number, reread verse 33:14 and rest assured there is hope for the future.

Until then let us continue to seek justice in our own little worlds, living our lives with Jesus as our model. We will care for those we encounter that are in need to the best of our ability and always seek to do the right thing in all things. Until then, let us be prepared for the battle we have with the world, and defend ourselves from the battle the world has with us. Let us continue to fight the urge to give in.

Until then, let us continue to seek God's guidance for our lives, and to practice the spiritual disciplines that allow Him to draw ever nearer to us. Prayer, fasting, Bible study, Christian fellowship and Holy Communion are some of the ways we invite God to draw near to us.

Until then, let us continue to recognize that Jesus is the "Lord our Righteousness, for we can never be found righteous without Him. Until then, let us allow Jesus to draw even closer to us this Advent season than ever before and thank Him anew for His grace, mercy and love. Amen