

Advent 2011 Part 1

So That's What Advent's About!

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. As you know, I grew up in the Assemblies of God and we never talked about Advent. That was something the churches with stained glass and candles talked about, but not us. So I want to take a moment and explain what Advent is about and explain why I think this is important for us as Assembly of God folks.

The term advent is taken from a Latin word which means “coming” or “arrival.” For instance, we talk about the “advent of the computer age”. We are just talking about the coming of the computer age - the arrival of the computer age. In the church world then Advent refers to the anticipated arrival of Jesus as a baby born in Bethlehem, born to be our Savior.

In the church, the season of Advent refers specifically to the four Sundays before Christmas Day. We think of the Christmas season as beginning immediately after thanksgiving and lasting until January 1, but for much of the church's history and still in the Eastern churches, the Christmas Season begins Christmas Eve and lasts until January 6. January 6th is celebrated in the church as Epiphany. The word epiphany means to reveal or to make known. Church tradition celebrates the Epiphany on January 6th as the day the wise men found Jesus and by their gifts they made known that he was the king of kings. (Orthodox Christians talk about the Nativity Fast rather than Christmas.)

Between Christmas, December 25th and Epiphany, January 6th, are twelve days. Now you know where the phrase (and the song) the twelve days of Christmas came from. So you've got Advent – the four Sundays prior to Christmas Day. You've got the Christmas season – from December 25 (or December 24th evening) to January 6th, and you've got Epiphany on January 6th. Then you can throw in the Julian calendar which the Orthodox and Eastern churches use instead of the Gregorian calendar that we use and January 6 corresponds to our December 24th. It gets real confusing as you add in other church traditions and saints days and then mix in several cultural traditions. Maybe that's why our churches never celebrated Advent, it got too confusing.

But let me suggest something to you. Let me share with you why I think this idea of Advent is becoming so important for me and why I think it should be important for our churches. As some of you know, when I became pastor in 1985, I began preaching an Advent series that year. Actually, I didn't really even know what Advent was or when it began, I just took the

month of December to preach a series of messages on the incarnation and Jesus' birth. (Incarnation is a fancy word to refer to Jesus being born, God becoming flesh). I felt to only focus on this incredible miracle one Sunday out of the year simply wasn't enough for me. But over these past years, as the whole American Christmas season has become more and more about commerce and a secular holiday and less about the birth of Christ, I think it has become even more important for the church to celebrate Advent.

I've almost come to the conclusion that the church should celebrate the birth of Christ at an entirely different time of the year. (Scholars believe Jesus was likely born sometime in the spring months rather than in December anyway.) Let's let Madison Avenue have their own holiday - and then as the church, let's find a time to celebrate the incarnation and the nativity of Jesus.

I think in my mind Christmas has become the holiday that we all enjoy and I'm okay with celebrating "Christmas." I like all the songs about the season. I'm happy to sing about Santa and Rudolph and baby it's cold outside. I love to dream about a white Christmas and all the rest. Give me a tree and some ornaments and dozens of snow men like Paula has and I'm happy. Let's have a parade and we can call it a Christmas parade or a holiday parade or a winter festival and then we won't have to get mad about its' name because it's just a celebration of a secular season and holiday. We aren't trying to keep Christ in Christmas because Christmas isn't about Jesus anymore, it's about Santa and WalMart and big screen tvs. You saw all those pictures of people fighting to get ahead of each other to get the bargains at Walmart. Yep, that's the spirit of Christmas isn't it? And those folks who are screaming and clawing their way through the crowds, shoving people out of the way, jerking bargains out of the arms of others, some of them are the same people who will scream the loudest about how we need to keep Christ in Christmas. I'm just not sure we can find Christ in the current American experience we call Christmas. In fact, I wouldn't even look for him there.

Advent however, well that's a whole different thing. Advent doesn't need a parade because it is an entirely spiritual thing that the world and the markets aren't able to touch. Advent for me then is anticipation of a spiritual reality of the birth of Christ. It is the coming of the Bread of Heaven and the preparation of our hearts and minds to feast on that Heavenly Bread during this season of the year. Advent is the time to focus on this greatest of miracles, that God

became flesh, that he took upon himself our nature in order to take upon himself our sins so that by faith we could partake of his nature and his righteousness. I'm not a very good soldier in the culture war I guess but in my head I've rescued Jesus from a holiday that doesn't have much to do with him anymore and I'm trying to find a new way to honor him and what he has done for me. That's why I'm a fan of Advent. I want to try to help us stay focused on what is truly important at this season. So go ahead and celebrate Christmas and the holidays, but then let's observe Advent and the holy days. Maybe we didn't do a very good job of keeping Christ in Christmas but let's see if we can at least keep Christ in Advent.

With that said, you're thinking, "now tell me again, what's the point of Advent? What is it all about?" Think of silence. Think of the 400 years of silence between the Old and New Testament. Is God finished with Israel? Has he stopped talking? Have all the signs and wonders come to an end? It sure looks that way. Is there a sign that things are about to change? The prophet Isaiah had mentioned a sign. **"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign; the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel."** **Isaiah 7:14** Advent anticipates the breaking of the silence with that extraordinary message - unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord. Salvation will come to you and Advent anticipates the arrival of that extraordinary sign and that extraordinary salvation.

Advent is about anticipation and expectation. During Advent, Jesus hasn't been born yet. Heaven's preparations aren't yet complete. It's not the fullness of time, not just yet. During these four Sundays, Mary and Joseph haven't made it to Bethlehem yet. The manger is still empty, but not for long. We can see Mary and Joseph on the road from Nazareth. Their pace is steady but slow as the roads are getting crowded with folks heading to Bethlehem because of that no good Roman Caesar and his taxes. "Census my eye. All they want is my money!" (Listen to a little fable about a couple of angels preparing for Jesus birth, written by Calvin Miller.)

Advent is about anticipation. Is it time? Not yet, but almost. It's almost time for the silence of 400 years to be broken. God is about to speak to Israel and to the whole world again and this time his silence will be broken by the cries of a newborn baby. Something extraordinary is about to happen. Can you feel it? Can you sense it? God the Savior is about to be born to us, Christ the Lord, and this will be the sign to us - a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. This is what Advent is all about. Anticipation. So you can have your black Friday sales

and your egg nog and frosty the snowman, but give me a quiet moment to ponder the fullness of time that approaches. After all these years of silence, without a word or a sign from God, the heavens are about to open, the angels are about to sing, a baby is about to be born. Arrival. He's coming. That's Advent – preparing our hearts for the arrival of the new born King!

Advent is born out of a certainty, a faith that God will yet speak. He will intervene once again, when the time is exactly right. That's good news for us, for some of us this morning are experiencing the difficult longing that comes with anticipation. For us as children, waiting for Christmas to get here was the worst! It was so slow arriving. We're still waiting, for something even more important than packages and toys. We've been waiting for God to break his silence in our personal life. It's been too long since we've seen his hand at work in us. We've been waiting, anticipating his intervention, his healing, his words, his signs, but nothing has happened. Don't give up. Advent reminds us to keep watching and waiting expectantly. See Mary and Joseph on the road? Advent is the season for marking their progress. Just as surely as you see them and you know that Jesus will be born, your miracle, your sign, your answer is on the way. God will speak. He will answer. He will intervene. He will arrive, just in time, just at the right time. That's the importance of Advent. Every time you see a manger scene, let it remind you - Jesus is coming. He's coming to me in my life and He will be right on time

Advent is about hope. Hope that the way things are today – well, that's not the way things will be tomorrow. The prophet said, **“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.” Isaiah 9:2.** You know what it's like to walk in darkness? Everything is uncertain. You lack the confidence to take a bold step because you can't see what is ahead. There are monsters lurking everywhere you turn, hiding in the shadows. At least that's the way it looks to you when you are walking in the dark. Everything is frightening and sinister and unknown to us. But Advent is about hope. It is the promise of light invading our darkness. Things are about to change. The darkness will be shattered. Notice the prophetic past tense. Isaiah said it like it had already happened – “the people walking in darkness have seen...” He could speak of it in the past tense even though it would not happen for hundreds of years because it was just that certain. God had promised. God had spoken and it would happen because God is faithful. He cannot lie.

Look with me at Isaiah 9. We read verse 2, but look at verse 1. **“Nevertheless, there**

will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.” I like the hopefulness of Advent! No more gloom for us who have experienced darkness and distress. For those of us who know what it feels like to bear the heavy burdens, to not be able to lift our heads because of the gloom, look at the promise of verse 4. **“For as in the day of Midian’s defeat (Israel’s arch-enemy), you have shattered the yoke that burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.”**

Israel knew about battle and about being oppressed. And the people of Israel in Jesus’ day were experiencing this oppression by the Romans. They experienced first hand, every day, the yoke that burdened them, the bar across their shoulders and the rod of their oppressor. They were living in hope of the coming of Messiah, the Savior that would set them free from that oppression. They were expecting a political savior, but God had something entirely different, something entirely greater for them and for us. The prophet said, **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.”** Isaiah 9:6-7

Advent is the anticipation of the coming of the one who will rule and reign forever. There will be no end to his kingdom and his reign. But there is even more. The people expected a Savior who would come to liberate them from their oppressors, but the angel told Joseph that he and Mary were to call his name Jesus, which means Savior, because “he will save his people from their sins.”

He had come to save, but not simply to save us from our oppressors but more importantly to save us from ourselves! He has come to save us from our sins, our sinfulness, from our own fallen and devilish nature. Advent fills us with hope as we realize He will come to save us from hell and from eternal separation from God. He will come as a savior and oh, what a Savior.

Advent is about anticipation and about hope. And **Advent is about reflection.** It is about us, taking the time to reflect upon the ways of God, to reflect upon the mysteries of God, upon the faithfulness of God, upon the love of God. **Advent is a reminder to trust!** Every time we find ourselves in darkness, wondering if there is a light at the end of the tunnel, we remember that those living in darkness have seen a great light. Jesus, the light of the world is coming and

he will pour that light upon us. It is about remembering God's faithfulness. That he always keeps his promise, he always honors his word.

What are you expecting? What are you anticipating? Are you anticipating his deliverance? His help? His intervention? Are you expecting his arrival in your life and your circumstances? Advent reminds us to keep expecting, to keep anticipating. In the fullness of time, he will come to us.

Advent is about preparation. It is about preparing our hearts for his arrival. If you are expecting a baby, you spend months preparing. You get a nursery all ready, the walls painted, the furniture all fixed the way you want it. There is a lot of preparation involved as you welcome that newborn into your home and into your life. Advent is about that kind of preparation as we prepare our hearts once again for his arrival.

Think of the time spent preparing for Christmas. Some of you shopped all night long last Thursday night and into Friday. Why? To save money and to get your shopping done as you prepared for Christmas. You were preparing for the arrival of Christmas. Some of you spent days decorating the inside and outside of your house for Christmas. Preparing for the holidays, we say.

Well, I'm suggesting you take time for some spiritual preparation. You spent hours shopping and decorating, how about spending a few minutes to read Luke or Matthew's account of the nativity? Spend a few moments each day meditating on what it means, that God sent his son into the world to save us. Prepare your heart for his arrival. And let me encourage you to make sure you are prepared for his next arrival as well.

While Advent refers to his coming, his arrival as a baby in a manger, the same Latin word is used to refer to his second coming. The Latin word for advent is the translation of the Greek word parousia. It is the word we use to refer to his second coming when he comes to judge the living and the dead. Advent should be about preparing our hearts for his arrival, not just for the first arrival, but for the second as well.

Advent is another way of saying, "Get ready! Something important is about to happen! Get ready." Jesus said, "**No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard. Be alert! You do not know when that time will come.**" **Mark 13:32-33**

Are you ready? Are you ready for Advent? Are you ready for his coming? Let's use this time, this Advent season, to ready our hearts for the miracle of his birth. Let's prepare our hearts to gaze with wonder into the manger, God in the flesh. Immanuel. But let's also use this time to prepare our hearts for the miracle of his return. Mary didn't know the day or the hour of his arrival until the birth pains began. We don't know the day or the hour, but friends, the birth pains have begun. The signs are all around us. It's time to prepare. Get ready. Jesus is coming!

I want to give you the opportunity to get ready for his arrival. Ready your heart as you anticipate his coming to you. Unlike the inn in Bethlehem, prepare a place for Jesus in your heart and life, in your schedule over the next four weeks. What must you do to ready yourself to receive Jesus? How about making time and preparing a place in your heart to receive Jesus? Make a home for him in your life today.