

Advent Hope

It is here. The place has been transformed for the Season. The choir is singing. And we are placing our attention on the four traditional *themes of Advent*: Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

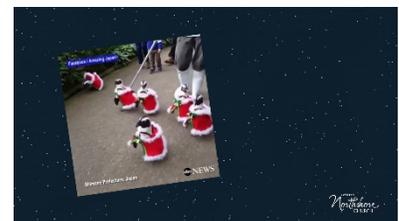
We use these candles as a way to count down the four weeks, each candle representing one of these pillars... and the center candle, the large, red pillar that represents Christ, will share its light on Christmas Eve.

This first pillar of the season, Hope, contains within it a vitally important theme that runs through Advent: **waiting**. Advent is a season of **waiting**, reminding us that **it is okay to wait**.

We all know it is okay to wait... right? If we do, we usually don't *act like it* in our culture. We don't like to wait. If we have to wait, we complain about it. If we can, we will *buy our way out* of waiting (if you don't want to wait in traffic, pay the toll... if you don't want to wait at the amusement park, pay the premium price... if you don't want to wait at the airport, buy the first class ticket).

Much of what our culture makes out of Christmas *breaks the rules* of waiting. Historically, these weeks leading up to Christmas was not at all about *celebrating*; it was about **waiting**... not starting the celebrating until Christmas Day (that is when the 12 days of Christmas started). But we don't wait... we've already started the celebration... for some, it started weeks ago.

Why wait... when we can have all of this sort of thing now? What does *Christmas penguins out for a walk* have to do with **Advent**... well, not much... but it is pretty amusing. If I could book them for a service... well... I might.



Please don't misunderstand. If you know me, you know that I'm all in favor of these sorts of cultural celebrations of the Season... I don't have a problem with Frosty, Rudolph, Santa, or even The Grinch. This is all a great deal of fun!

And I can't get enough of these guys. Do you know these Veggie Tales guys? I had polish aunts and uncles on both sides of my family growing up... so these various foods were around in my Chicago upbringing.



But let's not forget what is truly at the **heart** of the Season. These weeks of Advent, and these themes of Advent, are great tools to help us align our hearts with the true meaning of Christmas... that God became a human to save humans. God took on *frail humanity*, in the most humble way (the regular way), invading human history and **changing** human history.



Advent, especially the **waiting**, is *out of sync* with our cultural celebrations of the Season. The often-quiet, purposeful **waiting** is *at odds* with the **fast** and **loud** and **frantic** way that our culture celebrates.

So on this first Sunday of Advent, this Sunday of **Hope**, let's approach the figure that is at the beginning of all four Gospels.

The story of Jesus is so significant that it is told from four perspectives in our Bibles with the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. All four begin with a significant figure to start the story. It would be reasonable to assume that the **Baby Jesus** is that figure... but that is not the case. We only find the *Baby Jesus* at the beginning of Matthew and Luke. All four Gospels begin with a different figure: John the Baptist.



These are two very different figures.

- The Baby... Holy Infant, so tender and mild.
- John the Baptist... one who called people to his baptistry *off the beaten path*, wearing the sort of things associated with a *wild man*, with comforting words like these:



“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”¹

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?”²

The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.³

¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 3:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 3:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 3:10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Merry Christmas!

We've managed to fit the *Baby Jesus* into our good cheer at Christmastime... but what do we do this wild man? It would seem irresponsible to only embrace the *Baby Jesus* at Christmastime when the Scripture holds John the Baptist up as the one to introduce the Season.

Shall we just take **that** as our message of Hope for Advent? Repent you brood of vipers?!?

No... that would be an incomplete Gospel as well. I am not here to judge or condemn today.

there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.⁴

We put it out front on the sign: **Hope Found Here...** and we mean it.

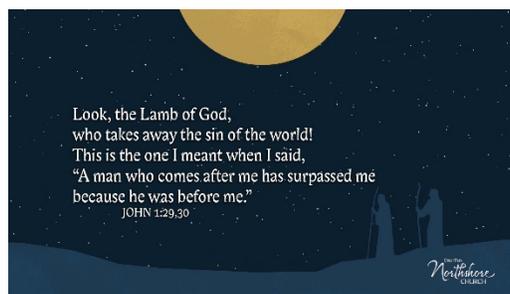
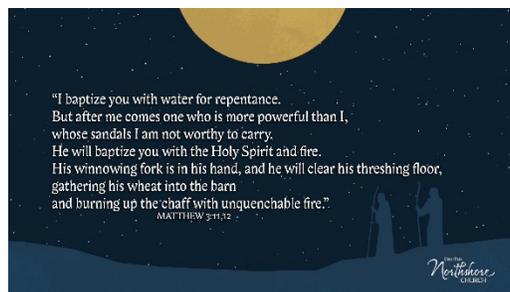
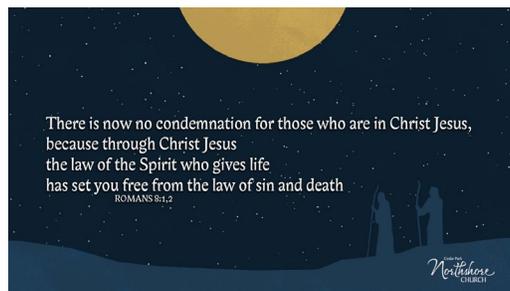
Nevertheless, what is the lesson to learn from John the Baptist? Perhaps it is this: the Hope of Advent is not merely that a Baby was born, but that God has come.

Hear what John went on to say:

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."⁵

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!
³⁰ This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'⁶

The real Hope of Advent cannot be contained in waiting for a romanticized Nativity Scene or the warm glow of candles; the real Hope of Advent is that God has come, God is with us, and God is coming again.



⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 8:1–2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

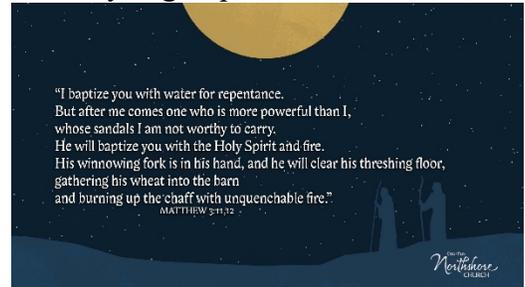
⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Mt 3:11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 1:29–30). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Here is how author and Episcopalian pastor [Fleming Rutledge puts it](#):

The extremely odd thing about Advent, in spite of its reputation as a season of preparation for Christmas, is that its emphasis really does not fall on the coming of Jesus as a baby in Bethlehem, but rather on the coming of Jesus as the Judge of all things at the end of time.

John does not proclaim Jesus as a captivating infant smiling benevolently at groups of assorted rustics, potentates, and farm animals. Instead, he cries out, “He who is coming after me is mightier than I. . . . His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:11–12).



No, the **Hope of Advent** is not merely “a captivating infant smiling benevolently at groups of assorted rustics, potentates, and farm animals.” The Hope of Advent is that we wait for God to **change** things... perhaps even shake things up... upending things... upending our lives.

How does that sit with us? Do we want things to change?

Honestly... I don't know. I'm fat and happy. I like my life... especially at this time of year with our traditions and such. I'm not sure I want much to change; sometimes I feel like I have a lot to lose.

I've been singing an old hymn, [Charles Wesley's Christmas Carol: Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus](#). We are going to sing it together in a few minutes... and likely throughout the season.



Laurie chose it as the theme for the women's tea that will happen in the coming days... and I *hijacked* it as the theme for our Advent Season (with permission, of course).

Like many Advent Hymns, it invites Jesus to **come**. We consider the way Jesus came as a human to save humans. We remember His promise that He will come again to reign for eternity. And we invite Jesus to come and invade our hearts and lives today.

When we invite Jesus to come... we should expect things to change. Hope implies change.

Again, Fleming Rutledge puts it like this:

“ the image of Jesus as the cosmic Judge who will ultimately come again to put an end to all sin and wickedness forever is not so frightening to the poor and oppressed of the earth as it is to those who have a lot to lose. If your loved one is in the habit of buying you expensive Christmas gifts, you might not be so crazy about the idea of Jesus coming back before Santa Claus gets here. But suppose...”

She then rattles off *some less than wonderful* scenarios, the sorts of things we can know by merely looking around us or reading a few headlines. Suppose:

- You are a Ukrainian pastor in a Russian prison because in *prewar tension* in disputed territory you were deemed a threat and unjustly jailed.
- You are stuck in a borrowed tent next to a makeshift outdoor sewer in Tijuana because you fled a tough situation hoping for a better life based on the fantasies of a misguided crowd.
- You are sick. Or unemployed. Or otherwise desperate?

Then we might sing “Come Jesus” and **really** mean it. And if we sing it, but don’t really mean it... can we, somehow, change that? Shouldn’t we mean it?

The Hope of Advent is not merely looking back at a Babe in Bethlehem. And it is not merely *sprinkling* a bit of *Baby Jesus* on **our** plans and such. The Hope of Advent is that God would show up, in all of His blazing power and holiness, and change things... and more importantly change us. It might take some time, and even effort on our part... so we wait.

This is what we hope for, real change. Sure, our Blessed Hope is secured in the promises of Jesus that we who believe will be with Him forever. But until then we wait... and there is hope in the waiting.

Friends, in the waiting, let us hope for change now. Perhaps we need to start with a *holy dissatisfaction* of how things are now. Perhaps the change we need is that we need to **want** change. Hope means that we are not satisfied.

- It means we are going to be weaned away from our possessions and oriented toward being everlastingly possessed by the love of God.
- It means that we will become less interested in receiving personal blessings for ourselves and more interested in making Christian hope known to those “dwelling in darkness” (Matt. 4:16).
- It means that we will become more and more thankful as we become less and less self-righteous.
- It means that we will gradually become less preoccupied with our own privileges and prerogatives and gradually see ourselves more and more in solidarity with other human beings who, like us, can receive mercy only from the hand of God and not because of any human superiority.

Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus... come, Lord Jesus, come.

Advent Hope isn't that we hope that God will pretty much leave us, and things, as they are, perhaps just with a little bit of His blessing added on top. Advent Hope means that we want change.

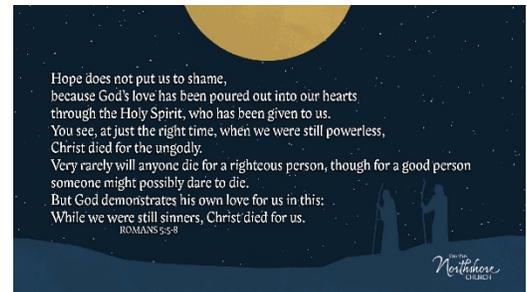
We will sing *Come...* as we are invited to come.

We'll serve the bread and the cup here at the front and we encourage you to come... take this literal step, a step that signifies a step toward Jesus, receiving what He freely gives.

Here's what Roman's 5 says about hope:

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.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁷

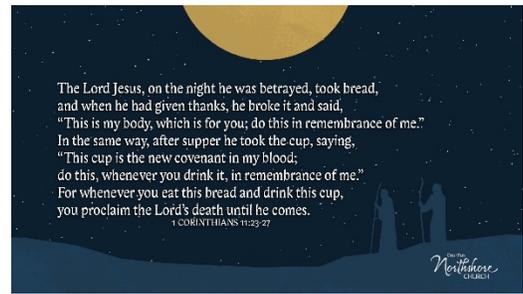


You might be here today and have never really received that gift of Hope from God. It could be that today is your day and the Hope of Christ is ringing true in your heart. It could be that you are hearing God's truth, not only with your **ears** but with your **heart** and **soul**. If that is you today, receive God's gift of Hope today. Believe in Jesus. Believe that the Christ of Christmas is a gift for you... and let that Hope become your Hope today. Invite Jesus to come... and expect change... start taking steps in that change.

For most here today, this step will be another among many steps toward Jesus made before. Let's embrace hope today, perhaps in a deeper more profound way. Can we come and expect change? Can we allow ourselves to be open to change? Can we, with gifts of faith and courage from God, take steps in the direction of change... doing what we know **we** can, or even ought?

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 5:5-8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,
²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.”
²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.”²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.⁸



Lord we wait... expecting you to come as You promised. And we wait, expecting you to come, now. Let us hear Your call today to change...

⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (1 Co 11:23–26). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.