

Advent Begins In the Dark

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[0 : 0 1] Good morning again. Welcome to Church of the Advent. My name is Jeff. I'm one of the pastors here, and it's my delight to welcome you, especially if you're joining us for the first time. If you're new or joining us for the first time, we'd love to meet you after the service by the front steps and hear your story. We're so grateful that you joined us this morning. Advent, the season of Advent, begins in the dark. Today's passages and lectures center on the second coming of Christ in the great judgment day of the Lord. Taken on their own, they are all sobering and even terrifying images of judgment. You may have noticed already that the feel of our service is a little bit more somber than it normally is. Especially if you're newer to the Anglican tradition or a liturgical tradition like ours, your experience of the season of Advent, your experience in our worship service today, might be similar to that Old Spice commercial that was popular many years ago, where a muscular, charming, handsome man has just gotten out of the shower, and he's standing in the bathroom with just a bathrobe, a towel around his waist, and he's looking into the camera and to the audience, and he says, hello, ladies. Look at your man. Now look back at me. Now back to your man and back to me.

Sadly, he isn't me, but if he uses Old Spice deodorant, he could smell like me and look like me. It's an old commercial. Some of you probably remember that one. Sometimes that's what the season of Advent feels like. We look at the passages that we just read about the doom and gloom of God's judgment. And then we look back to the culture around us, and people are, everyone's trying to spread the joy of the holiday season, decorating Christmas trees, putting up lights, making holiday baked goods, buying and wrapping gifts, playing Christmas music, wrapping presents, hosting parties.

And then we look back to the lectionary readings, and we see that they're about God's judgment. And then we look back to the decorations and the lights and the music and the parties and the shopping, and we think, man, what a buzzkill. Our worship service could use some Old Spice.

Our worship service could use some holiday cheer. Especially if you're new to a more liturgical tradition like ours, this back and forth can be surprising and even disorienting.

Exactly. Exactly. Exactly. That's the point. Zechariah 14, Psalm 50, Luke 21 are not Merry Christmas images, but they are Advent images. Advent begins not with joy to the world in the first coming of Christ, but with a sobering reality of God's judgment in the second coming of Christ. Why is this? Why focus on apocalyptic images of judgment in a season when everything around us is trying to make us look at light and joy and holiday cheer? That's what we're going to look at this morning. Why does Advent begin in the dark? And we're going to see three reasons. And the first is this. Advent begins in the dark.

[3 : 39] First of all, to wake us up. To wake us up. Passages like Zechariah 14, Psalm 50, and Luke 21 are intended to have a direct emotional impact on our senses and imagination. They are meant in many ways to surprise us and startle us. Zechariah 14 tells of the day when God himself will come down to Jerusalem as a warrior dressed in battle as a conquering king who comes to vanquish his enemies. Psalm 50, that was just so beautifully sung, gives us a vivid image of God as a judge who is perfect in righteousness and holiness and beauty and who is surrounded by a devouring fire and a mighty tempest. In Luke 21, Jesus is telling his disciples what will happen when he returns in his second coming. There will be signs in the heaven above and the sun, the moon, the stars, and the earth will be in great distress with the seas raging and tossing. It will be a time when many people live in anguish and fear. Jesus says some people will even faint at the terror of what's happening before the Son of Man comes in the clouds with power and great glory. And in the daily ordinary humdrum of our lives, we are likely not often thinking about these things. We're probably thinking about what's happening at work, what's on our calendars, what's happening at our kids' schools, the bills that we need to pay, the laundry that needs to get done, the meals that we need to get cooked. And these are all good things. These are things that God has called us to be faithful in as part of our vocations. These are things that matter to God. These are things that matter to our neighbors. But it's easy to forget in the ordinary humdrum of our lives that our lives are caught up in a great cosmic story. A great cosmic story involving the struggle between the powers of good and evil. A cosmic story that is playing around, playing out around us all the time in ways that we can't fully see or know. And one day, we are promised at the end of history, the Lord of all the earth is going to return as the conquering king in Zechariah 14, the righteous judge in Psalm 50, and the glorious Son of Man in Luke 21.

And when he comes, he is going to come with power and authority and glory, and to bring vengeance on the powers of sin and death and evil and injustice. This is something I think that is easy for all of us to forget. Even for church people like me, as I was studying these passages in the midst of the my own ordinary humdrum of my own daily life, I was forced to reflect on these realities.

These things are going to happen. They're going to happen. These aren't some things out of a science fiction or fantasy novel. They are going to happen one day. And that is a sobering reality to reflect on.

It prompts us to ask questions like, what is my life really about? What am I really living for? Who am I really living for? If the things in these texts happened tomorrow, would I be ready? Am I ready to face God's judgment? Am I ready to face eternity?

All of our lives rest on the edge of eternity. And we will either spend eternity with God or we will spend eternity without God.

[7 : 20] And someday each one of us will face Jesus Christ as Lord and as King and as Judge. And if we don't wake up to that reality now, we will not be ready for that day.

What about you? Are you ready to face Jesus as your Lord, as your King, and as your Judge? So that's the first thing that we see. We see that Advent begins in the dark. First of all, to wake us up. One of the second reasons why Advent begins in the dark is to help us be honest about the darkness. To help us be honest about the darkness. For some of us, the idea of God's judgment in the second coming honestly feels like something out of a low-budget, poorly-made movie.

Or perhaps it's the kind of antiquated thing that people believed in long ago, centuries ago, but we know better now in our modern world of progress and science and technology that these are things that people no longer believe in. Maybe this is because you don't believe in a God at all, or maybe you believe in a benevolent God of love and mercy, but not a God of judgment. But have you really thought about what it would mean? Have you really thought about what it would mean? For there not to be a God of judgment. For there not to be a God of judgment.

Over the past week, Thanksgiving holiday, spent lots of time watching Harry Potter movies. And one of the great scenes that I was reminded of in the first book, in the first movie, The Sorcerer's Stone, near the end of the story when Harry and Hermione and Ron go searching for the Sorcerer's Stone in the depths of Hogwarts, near the end of that story, Harry meets Voldemort for the first time. And I won't share the details of that because some of you, I realize, might be reading that book for the first time. And I don't want to share any details that might ruin it, but suffice it to say, he meets Voldemort for the first time. And what's one of the things that Voldemort tells Harry in that moment? He tells Harry, there is neither good nor evil, only power, only power, and those who are too weak to seek it. And of course, Friedrich Nietzsche said the exact same thing many years ago in his book, Beyond Good and Evil. God doesn't exist, and therefore good and evil don't really exist either. Good and evil are just fantasies of religions like Christianity. The only thing that exists is the human will to power. But if there's not a God who judges evil, then what resources do we have? What do we actually say in the face of real evil? What do we say to those who have been victims of injustice or abuse? Rachel Denhollander was one of the many women who testified against Larry Nassar, the U.S. gymnastics coach who was convicted in one of the largest sexual abuse scandals in the history of sports involving hundreds of young athletes.

Denhollander's testimony is powerful. I'd encourage you to read the whole thing. But in her testimony, she draws upon C.S. Lewis and the Christian tradition to speak the truth about the darkness of Nassar's actions. She says, throughout this process, I have clung to a quote by C.S. Lewis, where he says, my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust.

[10 : 50] But how did I get this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he first has an idea of something called straight. What was I comparing the universe to when I called it unjust? Larry, I can call what you did evil and wicked because it was. And I know it was evil and wicked because the straight line exists. The straight line is not measured based on your perception or on anyone else's perception. And this means I can speak the truth about my abuse without minimization or mitigation. And I can call it evil because I know what goodness is. When a person loses the ability to define good and evil, they cannot define evil. And they can no longer define and enjoy what is truly good either. Denhollander gives us powerful words and she reminds us that without a God of judgment, we have no objective standard to define what good and evil are. And if we can't define good and evil, all we are left with in the face of real evil is our own feelings and opinions and preferences.

And therefore, Voldemort and Nietzsche are both right. There's no good or evil. There's only power. God and those who are too weak to seek it. And that's not a world I think any of us want to live in.

But if there is a God of judgment, the good news is that not only can we define good and evil, but we can trust in the fact that one day he will hold all evil and justice to account and bring an end to it. All we have to do is to scan the news headlines to know how real the darkness in the world is and how deep human suffering goes. Just a quick glance of the news headlines this past week shows us that devastating wars continue to rage in places like Ukraine, Syria, and Middle East.

Hundreds of thousands of people are suffering on the verge of starvation in Gaza. Terrorist organizations like Hamas and Boko Haram terrorize the world with violence and death on almost a daily basis.

In our own country, there have been 78 school shootings this year. This fall, Hurricane Helene devastated parts of the Carolinas and Southeast, leaving hundreds dead and many still suffering.

[13 : 15] Just this past week, a pastor in West Virginia was charged with 190 cases of abuse over many decades. Our own city is plagued by the perpetual darkness of gun violence and drug addiction and rising homelessness. To be Advent people means that we don't sugarcoat or ignore the darkness in the world, but we speak the truth. We name it for what it is, just like Rachel Denhollander did. But I think if we're honest, it's probably not the darkness in the news headlines that most of us are prone to sugarcoat or ignore. Rather, it's the darkness within our own hearts. To be honest about our struggles with sin, to be honest about the things that we're ashamed of, for many of us, this can be really challenging.

But the invitation of the season of Advent is to accept reality as it is and to be honest about the darkness. To say, yes, I really do have a problem with alcohol or substance abuse. I really do struggle with anger or envy or pride. I really do have feelings of resentment and bitterness towards that person. I really do look at things on the internet I shouldn't look at. I really am selfish and self-centered to my core. And I have contributed to broken relationships in my life.

The season of Advent makes us look at the darkness and it helps us to be honest about our own sin. It also invites us to be honest about our suffering. It also invites us to be honest about our suffering.

For some of you, this has been the hardest year of your life. It's been a time of grief and pain and heartache. And I know this because I've heard many of your stories. Some of you have experienced or you have been close to those who've experienced things like major health issues, cancer, suicide, the untimely death of loved ones, losing a job, losing friends, struggles in your marriage, the persistent heartache of singleness. The more that you feel the darkness of living in a broken world, the more dishonest and forced it can feel to leapfrog to Christmas joy. And some of you feel that right now. To pretend as if things are okay when they are most definitely not. But here's the good news.

You don't have to. You don't have to pretend as if things are okay when they're not. You don't have to leapfrog to Christmas joy. The season of Advent begins in the dark because the God we worship is not naive about the darkness. Psalm 50 tells us that God is a God of justice and he is not silent. He's not silent. He sees. He knows. And that is what gives us space to say things are not okay. This world is not okay. We're not okay. I'm not okay. To be Advent people means that we are honest about the darkness.

[16 : 47] We don't ignore or sugarcoat it, but we name it. We speak the truth about it. We confess it. We lament it. We lament it. And we grieve it. So that's the second thing. Advent begins in the dark, first of all, to wake us up. And secondly, to help us to be honest about the darkness, about our sin, about our suffering. Thirdly, finally, Advent begins in the dark to crack open the door to hope. To crack open the door to hope. The apocalyptic images of judgment in Zechariah 14, Psalm 50 and Luke 21 may wake us up and sober us and startle us, but the reality of the day of judgment and the second coming of Christ doesn't have to be something that leaves us in anxiety or fear or dread. No, it's actually quite the opposite. Quite the opposite. If we read all of our passages this morning in their full biblical context, we will find that they do not leave us in the darkness, but they encourage us and they move us forward to hope. In Zechariah chapter 14, verses eight and nine, we see this image of the whole earth being unified under a God who reigns as king.

We see an image of living water that is flowing out from Jerusalem to the rest of the earth. It's this image of God's kingship and reign bringing life and flourishing and justice to the whole world.

In Luke 21, verse 28, the disciples are told to stand up and lift up their heads as the world experiences tribulation because the redemption of God's people, their salvation is coming.

And in Psalm 50 and in Zechariah 14, we have this promise that to a world full of darkness, to people living in darkness, our God comes. God comes. And this is the promise of the season of Advent. And this is the entire foundation of our hope that our God comes. Jesus Christ comes as the conquering king of Zechariah 14. He comes as the judge of all the earth in Psalm 50. And he comes as the glorious son of man in Luke 21. And for those who have put their ultimate hope in him, the great judgment day of the Lord is not a day that we need to fear or dread. It's actually a day that fills us with hope. Because in Jesus Christ, what we see is that judgment day has already come through his death on the cross. The cross of Christ is the objective evidence that God is not naive about the darkness of the world, about the darkness in your life. On the cross is where Jesus faced all the darkness and evil that all of human history has ever faced. And he took it on himself. He took it on himself. The darkness inside of your heart, the darkness inside of my heart, all of God's judgment for sin was poured out on him in our place. Jesus, the righteous judge, was judged on the cross in our place. So that when he comes again in great power and glory, we can stand before him not with dread or fear, but with assurance and confidence and hope in his love, his forgiveness, his mercy, his grace. And those who put their trust in him have this incredible hope that all of the darkness in the world and all of the darkness in our lives has an expiration date. Because when Christ comes again, he will renew and restore all things. His justice will prevail and he will destroy evil and pain in all of its many forms. He will wipe away every tear.

Sin and death will be no more. Sin and death will be no more. And all darkness will be swallowed up in light. But until that day, between now and then, we are Advent people. Not just because it's the name of our church, but because we live in between, we live in the time of the already but not yet. Between Christ's first and second coming. And I absolutely love the way that theologian Fleming Rutledge puts it.

[21 : 45] And she puts it like this. To be a Christian is to live every day of our lives in solidarity with those who sit in the darkness of the shadow of death.

And in the unshakable hope of those who expect the dawn. To be a Christian is to live every day of our lives in solidarity with those who sit in the darkness of the shadow of death. And in the unshakable hope of those who expect the dawn. That is what it means to be an Advent people. The church is a community that lives and worships and prays within this great tension.

Within this great tension of the grief and the sorrow of the present darkness. And the inevitable hope, the unconquerable hope that one day that darkness will be overcome.

And in just a moment, we're going to have an opportunity to live and to pray into that tension by praying the great litany together. This is a long series of prayers that's often prayed at the beginning of the season of Advent and the beginning of season of Lent.

And something happens, I think, when we pray these prayers together, if we have the spiritual awareness for it. First of all, it reminds us, it brings to our attention that the darkness is real.

[23 : 14] But perhaps more importantly, it reminds us that we are not alone in it. And this is good news for those of us here this morning who are struggling and suffering.

You are not alone. And you don't have to go through the darkness alone. You may notice in a moment when we pray the great litany together that many of the prayers don't actually fit your experience.

And that's part of the point. Prayers like this are meant to form us to be attuned to the grief and to the suffering of others. And to be ready to enter into that suffering and grief alongside them.

And to remind them, you are not alone. Christ is with you. We are with you. And as we enter into the as we enter into the griefs and sorrows of one another, we also remind each other of our great hope.

That our God comes. Our God comes. He has come and He will come again. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, He can bring light and hope and healing and transformation in even the darkest places of our lives.

[24 : 37] Advent begins in the dark. But it doesn't stay there. It proceeds with ever-growing light.

O come, O come, Emmanuel. Let's pray together. Our God and Father, we thank you that you have given us your word.

And your word reminds us of these sobering things. Lord, I pray that you would wake us up to the reality of your judgment.

That you would help us to be honest about the darkness. But perhaps more importantly, God, that you would awaken and enliven our hope. Our hope that you will one day come to renew and restore all things.

And that you can bring that hope into our lives even today. I pray this in Christ's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[25 : 45] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.