

Advent Between the Advents

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning and welcome everyone. Merry Christmas. It's great to be able to say that. My name's Kevin. I'm one of the pastors here at Church of the Advent. It's also great to be able to say that. I'm the newest addition to the pastoral team. I've been here for about two months and I'm really excited to be here. I want to say just thanks to everyone for all of your love and words of encouragement and kindnesses shown to us through meals. To my family and me, thanks especially for your prayers. Please keep praying for us. We have our third baby due in six days, which is right around the corner. We feel that very acutely. Susan's actually a little bit sick right now. She's at home with our two boys who are a little sick, so please pray for us.

This morning, I want to spend some time considering where we are both in the church calendar and the Gregorian calendar, sort of our civil calendar that everybody uses. I want to help us think through and process the purpose of Advent, the season from which we've just come, and orient us to the new year. And so I want to sort of just basically take stock of where we are. And I want to do that by asking three questions. Where are we? Who are we? And how should we then live? I know many of us are coming from really hectic weeks and we have lots of things on our mind thinking about the new year. Our minds are very cluttered thinking about all of those things. And so I want to take a moment before we really dig in, a moment of sacred silence where we can quiet our hearts, center our minds and our hearts to attend to the things that the Lord wants to speak to each one of us today.

So let's just take a brief moment of silence so that we can be prepared to receive from the Lord. Amen. Lord, we know that you are present here. Help us to be so present. Lord, speak for your servants are listening. Fill us, challenge us, equip us, and send us. We pray that you would send out your light and your truth. Let them lead us. We pray these things in Christ's name. Amen. So if you're anything like me, the day after Christmas or maybe even the evening of Christmas is marked by a tinge of disappointment. There's so much buildup, so much expectation, so much hope. And when the day actually arrives, it's a little bit of a letdown. I remember feeling this very strongly when I was a kid in school, middle school and high school. I always longed for the break from school, break from classes, a break from homework. And I looked forward to time with friends in the magical season of feasting and gifts and a time to actually sleep. And the day would come and it would go.

And it just wasn't as magical as I expected it to be. Either I didn't get the gifts that I wanted, or even worse, I did get the gifts that I wanted, and they just didn't live up to the advertiser's promises. Christmas Day, I end up feeling a bit like Clark Griswold when the lights on his house don't work. My family, every year, we have this tradition. It's a great tradition, where we watch the National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation. I don't know if any of you watched that. It's an amazing film. It's not a movie, it's a film, it's a classic. And there's this iconic scene in the movie where Clark Griswold, he decorates his house with, and I paid attention this year because I wanted, this scene is in my mind, I wanted to see if he mentioned how many lights. 250,000 lights, according to Clark. 250 strands of 100 light bulbs each. He puts them all over his house, they're covering his roof, the entirety of the surface area of his house, and his yard.

And he gets everyone out in his family, the grandparents, and they're doing a drum roll, and he has this big reveal where he's going to light the house. And if you've seen the movie, it doesn't work out very well. He plugs the lights together, and he's just disappointed. I think I have a picture here. I don't know if you can see it very well, but that's kind of how I feel sometimes on Christmas. I'm just a little disappointed. There's so much buildup. I do so many things to prepare, and the day comes, and it's just not what I was expecting it to be. I think I feel the disappointment and confusion more acutely now that I'm an adult. Maybe some of the magic is gone from Christmas, but I actually take Advent and Christmas far more seriously now as an adult, and I think that's why I feel a little bit more disappointed. You know, I was so excited for Advent this year. We had just moved, and I really personally just needed a jump start to my spiritual life. I don't know if you felt that way, but I really needed the season of Advent to focus more intently on my apprenticeship to Jesus, and so I guess you could say I took the risk of taking Advent really seriously. And so as much as I could bear, I tried to face the turmoil and the brokenness of the world, the suffering and the hurt in our church family, the needs of my own family, extended and immediate, and the issues in my own life. And I looked around. I tried to focus and attend to those things to pray for them, and I saw so much darkness. And so I would often read at the dinner table during Advent. We would often read together as a family the beginning of the Gospel of John that we read this morning.

[5 : 25] In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And so I would pray, come Lord Jesus, lighten the darkness, come and make all things new. Advent, the season, stirred up so many needs and desires and longings and hopes in my own heart. And I don't know what you were praying for or hoping for or expecting this season, but I was really praying and asking for a breakthrough in the world, in our church, in my family, in my own life. And I thought and I prayed, maybe, just maybe, Jesus would come, and he would finally fix all the things. That he would end the wars, that he would heal broken bodies, mend broken hearts, reconcile broken families. And so I entered into this season of Advent with some serious expectation in faith and in hope. And when Christmas finally came, I took stock and I asked, well, what's different? And if I'm honest, not really a whole lot.

The circumstances of the world, the wars, the oppression, the violence, the cruelty, the circumstances of my own life, the anger, the impatience, the fear, they're all roughly the same and maybe a little bit worse because I spent a lot of time at home and with family, which is always good and challenging. But as I've processed it and I've prayed through the disappointment and the confusion this past week, I've realized that something actually is different.

Even if my circumstances haven't changed and the circumstances of the world haven't changed a whole lot, Christ really has come to me and he has done work. I really did encounter Christ in fresh ways and I've been changed by him, even if in small ways. I'm more awake and I'm more aware of the hurts and the needs and the brokenness of the world. And it's not just a cognitive awareness. I've really like felt it in my body. Advent has produced in me what I'd call a holy frustration with the status quo and it's made me really want to get more involved in Jesus's mission to make all things new.

So I want to explore that together this morning. How can we get more involved in the mission of Jesus? And I want to do that by asking, looking at three questions together. Where are we? Who are we?

And based on the answer to those two questions, how should we live? What should we do about it? So our first question, where are we in the story? I want to consider this both in terms of our location on the plot line, where are we in the plot of the story of redemption, and also consider our particular roles as characters in the story. And so what I want to do, looking back a little bit, is reframe how we ought to imagine Advent. And by doing that, I want to fill out its meaning a little bit. So Advent just means coming, to come, and it has a triple meaning. Two of the meanings we're really familiar with, referring to when Christ came in the past and when he's going to come again in the future.

[8 : 14] So the first meaning, Jesus came in the past. That's the incarnation. That's what we celebrate at Christmas. When God took on flesh as Jesus Christ, like some of the songs we just sang, the human predicament of sin and death was so bad that the only solution was for God to send his one and only son to become human, to live a righteous life, to die a sinner's death, and to be raised up that we might, as John 1 states, believe in his name and become his children, enjoying relationship with him and inheriting eternal life. So we're familiar with that, the past that Jesus came with the incarnation. I think we're also pretty familiar with the second meaning, that Jesus will come again.

Theologians call this the parousia, which is just the Greek word for coming, the same as the Latin word for Advent. This is the second coming of Christ, where Jesus promises to return to judge the living and the dead, and to fully and finally set the world to rights, and to complete the new creation project that he really began in earnest with his death and resurrection. Now the third meaning that I sort of want to fill out for us this morning is to remind us that Christ didn't just come in the past, and he's not just going to come in the future. He comes to us every single day in the present.

We live between the times, between the Advents, as it were, and if we're paying attention, we'll see that God comes to us every single day, every moment, and then he comes to the world through us. That's what I want to explore together this morning. The concept here that I want to highlight in particular is participation. I want to highlight the concept of participation. Advent is the start of the new year, in the church year, and the purpose, at least one of the purposes, is to energize us for mission, to energize us to participate in new and fresh ways in the mission of Jesus Christ in 2019, this upcoming year. And so just as important as it is to remember the incarnation, to celebrate that God took on flesh, and to long and to hope for when he will come again, Advent functions to recharge us and to re-engage us with the mission of Jesus Christ here and now. I think that's part of the why in the wisdom of the Christian tradition, Advent starts the new year. It sets us up for the new year. So that's the first question. Where are we? We live in between the Advents, right in the middle of the action. And if we have the faith and if we have the fortitude, it's really an exciting time to be alive. So this brings us to the second question. Who are we? And embedded in the second question is really another question. What's our role in the story of redemption? We live in between the Advents, but what's our part to play? As I've processed going through Advent, I think that I entered into Advent with a mistaken expectation, at least slightly mistaken. You know, I was aware of all of the issues and all the problems and the brokenness of the world, and I thought, this is just so bad. If there's any way that this is going to get better, Christ has to do it all himself. And so I would sort of, I was praying sort of as this passive spectator saying, Lord Jesus, you go do the things.

And so at best, I was sort of imagining myself as someone who would just sort of watch and observe, knowing that God can and ultimately will accomplish things. But I was really imagining myself as a spectator. And I think this morning's passage from Acts speaks to this mistaken expectation that I brought into Advent, and it offers some correctives that I'd like to share this morning. So I want to make a few comments about the passage of Acts that we read this morning. And first, I want to look at Acts chapter 1, verses 6 through 8 in particular. I'll read it again for us.

This is what it reads. So when they had come together, they asked him, Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? He said to them, it is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth. So what we see here is the first recorded conversation between Jesus's disciples and the resurrected Jesus in the book of Acts. Right before this, we're told that the resurrected Jesus was spending time. He spent 40 days with the disciples, and he was teaching them about the kingdom of God. If you can imagine how amazing it would have been to sit under the resurrected Jesus's teaching about the kingdom. But as it turns out, it didn't really stick too well with the disciples. They didn't quite get it yet. The Holy Spirit hadn't come.

[12 : 57] To really illuminate for them. And so, I'm sure they asked him other questions, and Jesus would have said other things. But the author of Acts tells us this was their first question that we have, which is just really interesting and really illuminating. And I think it betrays their own misunderstanding about their expectations for what Jesus would do after he was resurrected. They didn't understand the nature of the kingdom of God. They thought it was for Israel over and against the nations.

And they didn't understand how it was going to be built. They were expecting Jesus himself to overthrow Rome, their pagan oppressors, and establish what they expected to be the kingdom for Israel.

Jesus was back from the dead, and they're thinking, Jesus, it's time to do your thing. It's been 40 days. It's time for you to finally do all that stuff that was prophesied about you. Bring justice.

Overthrow the oppressors. Feed the hungry. Heal the sick. I imagine them thinking, okay, Jesus, you came back to life. You were dead. You came back to life. I'm pretty sure that means you can't die again.

So let's go get Pilate. After we kill Pilate, let's go get Herod. After we kill Herod, let's march to Rome and overthrow Caesar, and let's just establish this thing here and now for Israel. Jesus, establish your kingdom.

[14 : 18] That's what they wanted him to do. That's what they're expecting him to do. And given these expectations, Jesus's reply would have been utterly baffling. He doesn't really quite answer their question, as Jesus is wont to do. Even the resurrected Jesus doesn't always answer our questions directly.

But he effectively says, no. Now is not the time, and you're not going to know what the time is. And the plan isn't actually for me to do everything myself. As a matter of fact, I'm going to be leaving, and you will be my witnesses. And so the first answer for who are we is that we are witnesses. So what is a witness? A witness is not just a passive spectator that observes things. A witness is a person who's bearing a divine message. It's effectively a representative, somebody who represents Jesus. So we're not just going to be watching what Jesus is going to do. Jesus is calling us to get into the game. This is where we get the word witness in Greek is *martus*. It's where we get the word for martyr. And a martyr is just somebody who bears witness to a message at the cost of their life. And so Jesus says, I'm going away, and I'm entrusting the message of the gospel, the good news, to you. And so this passage offers a corrective to their misunderstanding, to my misunderstanding.

Jesus doesn't intend to accomplish his mission by himself. He actually commissions his disciples as spirit-empowered witnesses. God comes to us and then plans to come to the world through us.

Now, after commissioning his disciples as witnesses, as representatives, he ascends to heaven. And even though Jesus may not be physically present any longer, it's a mistake to think that Jesus is no longer in the picture. And we see this in the very beginning of the passage we read in Acts verses one and two. I'll read it for us again. In the first book, O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach until the day when he was taken up after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen. Now, this is a really easy detail to miss because at the very beginning of Acts, you think it's just introductory, but it's actually really important. What you need to know about this passage and about Acts in particular is that Acts, the book of Acts, is really part two of a composite work that was written by the same author, Luke. Luke wrote Luke and Acts. Our Bibles separate them. The gospel of John is inserted in between Luke and Acts. And why that is is probably another sermon for a different day. But what the introduction of Acts tells us is that there's a part one.

He says in the first book, which is the gospel of Luke, that's what he's referring to, the author wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach. And so that implies that in the second book, he's going to talk about the things that Jesus continues to do and teach. This second book deals with what Jesus continues to do and teach. So how is that the case if right at the very beginning of the book, Jesus ascends to heaven? How does the ascended Jesus continue to do and teach things throughout the book of Acts? Well, even though Christ isn't physically present, he ascends to heaven, he continues to be actively involved through his Spirit-filled people. Because his Spirit lives in Christians, because his Spirit lives in us, Christ so identifies with us, he so identifies with the church, that the actions of the church are described as the actions of Christ. And we see that throughout the entire book of Acts.

[17 : 53] It's really interesting. I don't think there's any other way of making sense of really fascinating passages like Acts chapter 9 verses 4 and 5. We won't go into it to too much detail, but in this scene, the church has scattered. Saul is a persecutor of the church. He's a Pharisee of Pharisees, and he's basically terrorizing the church. He's persecuting the disciples of Jesus.

And in Acts chapter 9 verse 1, it says, Saul is breathing threats and murder against the disciples of Jesus. He actually oversees the first murder of one of the Christians, Stephen. And as Saul is walking along the Damascus road, basically hunting Christians, Jesus stops him in his tracks. You might remember this story. And Saul hears a voice, and the voice says, Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting, not the church, why are you persecuting me? And Saul says, who are you, Lord? And Jesus says, I am Jesus whom you are persecuting. So interesting. He's persecuting, Saul is persecuting the church, and Jesus is saying, you're persecuting me. The two are one, in a sense. This is explained by this really helpful doctrine by Saint Augustine. He was a fourth century theologian. He calls it the doctrine of totus Christus, the whole Christ. He writes this, the word was made flesh and dwelled among us. This is on his commentary on the gospel of John, which we read this morning. The word dwelled among us, and to that flesh is joined the church. And there, the church and Jesus Christ, the resurrected Jesus, is made the whole

Christ, the head and the body, the totus Christus. So we can't understand the church, we can't, apart from Christ, we can't really understand Christ apart from the church. We are his body in a very real and palpable sense. So what does all this mean for us? Well, I think this means that the mission of Jesus Christ, if we can put it this way, has been democratized to his people. We are on the front lines, and we're not just passive spectators, but we're active witnesses. We're the ones who are sharing the message of the gospel. Jesus Christ continues to do and teach things, to be very active in the world. He's accomplishing his mission and his purposes through us, his spirit-filled church, as we bear witness to the gospel. We are sharing the good news of Jesus as his hands and feet in the world, in word and deed.

This means that ours are the hands and feet and the mouths of Jesus Christ. It's up to us to bring the presence of Christ to bear on this earth, in our city, in our places of work, in our homes, in our families, in our friendships. The best description of this that I know is from one of my favorite poets.

It's called As King Fishers Catch Fire. It's one of my favorite poems that he's written, and this is the second stanza. I'll read it for you so you can follow along on the screen. He says this, I say more, the just man justifies. He's talking about Christ. The just man justifies keeps grace that keeps all his goings graces, acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is, Christ. For Christ plays in 10,000 places, lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his, to the Father through the features of men's faces. So what Hopkins is saying is that Christians live their lives acting as Christ in the world, and Christ acts through us. We act as Christ, and Christ plays in 10,000 places. So a quick review before we go to our final question. Where are we? We live between the Advents, the time when Christ comes to us by his Spirit, and then to the world through us. And who are we? We are Christ's witnesses.

[21 : 42] We are the body of Christ, and our role is to participate and to further the mission of Christ until he returns. We don't have time to look at it this morning, but in a really interesting way, the passage from Isaiah that we read about Israel being the light to the world is fulfilled in Jesus, which we read in the Gospel of John. And then later on in Acts, Paul actually applies Isaiah 49, verse 6 to the church. He says, we are the light of the world. We don't have time to go there, but we are continuing and furthering the mission of Christ in the world. So the third question, if all of that is true, what should we do about it? How shall we then live? What does all this mean?

What should we do about it? And I want to get really practical as we finish up. And I want to ask the question, how can we be good witnesses? I want to look into the new year. How can we be in new and fresh and more dynamic ways, Christ's hands and feet in 2019? You know, there are really so many places that we could land this morning, but I've decided to focus on hospitality. I want to land on hospitality and talk about that a little bit. So why hospitality? I want to explain briefly. First, it's actually one of our three key values as a church. Generous hospitality is one of our key values in addition to spiritual formation and missionary faithfulness. So in addition to it being one of our key values as a church, there are two other reasons why I want to focus on hospitality.

The first one happens to do with the loneliness epidemic that we experience in America. There's some really alarming statistics from a recent survey. The survey was of 20,000 Americans aged 18 to, I think, 55. And it was published by Cigna. And the results were released May 1st, 2018. I'll read some of the alarming statistics about loneliness in America. Nearly half of Americans report sometimes or always feeling alone or left out. One in four Americans rarely or never feel as though there are people who really understand them. Two in five Americans sometimes or always feel that their relationships are not meaningful and that they're isolated from others. And the last one I'll highlight, only around half of Americans have meaningful in-person social interactions, such as having an extended conversation with a friend or spending quality time with a family on a daily basis. And this loneliness epidemic has terrible effects on us emotionally and psychologically, but also very physically.

Ours is a nation. Ours is a city that's plagued by loneliness. And showing hospitality is a really practical way to show love to people who desperately need and deserve love and meaningful relationship.

So in addition to loneliness, the second reason is the polarization in America right now. Our city, our society is incredibly divided. You know this, I know this. We're divided into our own tribes and we demonize one another. We demonize one another. We dehumanize one another. And in many ways, Christian ideas are viewed as hate speech. Even the most articulate, most nuanced of Christians are often viewed as unloving, hateful, bigoted, or maybe at the very least offensive. And I think we're just not really likely to get anywhere in developing relationships if sort of our leading edge in doing so is talking about some of our fundamental differences in worldviews. Far better is it to show practical love and care, to fill bellies, and to fill hearts around the dinner table showing hospitality.

[25 : 43] And hospitality, I want to be clear, is not entertaining, which is a great thing. It's not hosting, merely hosting, which also is a great thing. It actually means that the New Testament word for hospitality is the love of a stranger. The Greek word is philo and xenia, love of stranger. That's what it means to show hospitality, to love strangers. Interestingly enough, it's kind of the exact opposite of xenophobia. Xeno, again, the word for stranger phobia, fear. Hospitality is sort of the opposite of the fear of strangers. Hospitality means we are to show love and practical care to the foreigner, to the other person, the person who's different from us. And as we develop relationships with the stranger and build trust and friendships, hopefully, eventually, we might earn the right to be heard, to share our understanding, our faith in who Jesus Christ is. I think in our context, one of the best ways to love well and one of the most effective ways to bear witness to the good news of the gospel is by showing hospitality. Hospitality is a really powerful way that God can come to us and to the world through us. To close, I want to illustrate the power of hospitality by talking about Rosaria Butterfield and her story. You may have heard of Rosaria Butterfield. Her story is one of ordinary hospitality changing her life. Before she became a Christian, she was a staunch atheist. She was a tenured professor at the University of Syracuse. And she was actively working on a book to discredit Christianity and to undermine the Bible because she thought the Christian faith and the Christian scriptures were foolish, illogical, and really dangerous. She wrote this really critical essay that got a lot of hate mail from

Christians. But she received one positive email and it came from a pastor. It was a local pastor in the Syracuse area and he invited Rosaria over to his house to have dinner with he and his wife. And at this very first meal, Rosaria is like, well, you know, if I'm doing this project to undermine Christianity, I need to get inside the head of Christians. This guy seems pretty nice. And she viewed him basically as sort of a research assistant is how she describes it. So she went over to his house and she said it was an amazing meal because this pastor didn't share the gospel and he didn't invite her to church. And she found this to be incredibly refreshing because she knew he was a pastor. She knew what he believed, but he didn't view her as a project. He viewed her as a neighbor. And that was incredibly endearing to her. And so she left the dinner and said, this has been a really wonderful time. Let's do it again. And over the course of the next few years, she would go to their house very regularly. And she said she was in their home. They didn't hide their faith. She got to know their friends. But the way that they practiced hospitality in their home, she said, became a living and breathing example of the theology that they were teaching. It was another two years from that first meal before she stepped foot in their church. But she was in their home every week getting to know them, sharing life together, getting to know friends from church. And she said the process of dialogue and table fellowship was really compelling. Over the course of time, she describes it as the gospel just sort of building momentum in her life. And eventually she came to the conviction that Jesus really is who he says he is. She's written a book about how she came to know the Lord through hospitality and how she practices hospitality. It's called *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*. I just ordered it. It's one of the top books on my two reads in 2019. As I was reading about the book, there was an interview. And I want to read a quote from the interview as she's talking about and articulating how she understands hospitality and its power. She says this, we need to give each other the reminder that it is God who saves. It's not about us being perfect or our words being perfect, but show up we must in the lives of unbelievers. What comes naturally to me and what comes naturally to you is to hang out with people who are like us, people who can finish our sentences, people who don't scare us. But hospitality, biblically speaking, takes strangers and makes them neighbors and takes neighbors and makes them the family of God. She goes on to say that through hospitality, the power of the gospel often brings people together who are supposed to be enemies.

Now in a moment, we're about to come to the Lord's table to receive his hospitality. The Lord's table is very much a table of hospitality. It's a meal where we remember and we celebrate the ways in which Christ in his incarnation, death and resurrection took us strangers and made us neighbors. And by faith in him took us neighbors and made us the family of God. As we feast on him in our hearts by faith, may we be filled to overflowing. And out of our abundance, may we be Christ's witnesses extending hospitality to the lonely and to the stranger. Let's pray together.