



TAKING A MOMENT TO PAUSE AND CONSIDER ADVENT

As we launch into the Christmas season, we're taking a look at advent and taking a fresh look at an ancient tradition to pause and reflect and celebrate the coming of Jesus. That's what advent means. It's an old Latin word meaning to celebrate the coming of Jesus. This is historically a season of great anticipation where we intentionally pause to consider what it would be like if Jesus had never come to us. This allows us to consider how God delivered on His promise. For the next four Sundays heading into Christmas, we're considering advent and four themes: hope, faith, joy, and love. We conclude with a celebration of Christ's birth on Christmas Eve Sunday.

1. What is your family doing to pause and consider the meaning of this season?

THE HISTORY OF ADVENT BEGINS IN A DARK TIME MEMORIALIZED IN THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

[Isaiah 9:1-7] The season of advent was first celebrated in the fourth century. The reason for it lies deep in the history of the people of God, more than 700 years before the arrival of Jesus as reflected in the Book of Isaiah and a time of darkness. The people of God were being oppressed and taken advantage of. During this time, they had progressively wandered from the ways of God. Distress was a daily fact of life. It was a low point in the history of God's people that had been cycling for several generations. Although the darkness grew, God's love for His people never decreased and so God sent a word of hope.

2. Are you experiencing a time of personal darkness or viewing what's going on in the world as a time of darkness?
3. How do the words of Isaiah still give us hope this holiday season?

THAT GOD HASN'T DONE IT YET DOESN'T MEAN HE'S NOT GOING TO DO IT

Some of us are currently in a season of darkness. Sometimes we can feel like we're banging on the doors of heaven and they're shut tight as we sit in darkness, and yet we can know that we live in a time of hope and live on the other side of the promise. As we read the history memorialized in Isaiah and consider the spots in our own lives that are dark, we need to remember that just because God hasn't done it yet doesn't mean He's not going to do it. For the people in Isaiah, 700 years passed, with 400 years of silence in the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Even after we find Jesus, we can find ourselves in periods of darkness—some that are out of our control and some that we've chosen ourselves. It can feel like 700 years of darkness because the darkness magnifies our perception of the passage of time. We can be stuck in a pattern of poor decision making, battling disease, be working hard and yet in a time of need, or in a place where we're angry with God for something He allowed to happen to us. These things can cause us to slowly walk away from God. The word we need to take away is that the darkness sucks and it's hard and it's awful to sit in, but God's people have a history of waiting longer than they would like for God to move. But God has been faithful in the past and we can count on the fact that He will do it again.

4. What are the areas of your life where you've been in a long period of waiting?

MOVING FORWARD, A GREAT LIGHT HAS DAWNED

[Isaiah 9:2,6 and John 1: 14, 18, 9] In Isaiah, God brought this word of hope. Cyclical chains of sin and oppression will be broken, peace will come, Jesus will come, and so on. Hope is salvation and tell us that none of us is too far gone. Hope is new life and no matter what we are experiencing now, something different is possible. Hope is eternal life because whatever we are experiencing here on this earth is not the end of the story but only a tiny stop in forever. These are all things we celebrate with the arrival of Jesus, but with advent there is a particular flavor of hope that is emphasized—a great light has dawned! Here is the first thing God said after the great silence: The Word has become flesh and dwelt among us. God tells them that the true light that gives light to everyone is coming into the world. Hope equals light. Jesus equals light. Jesus equals hope!

5. What kind of hope do you most need Jesus to give you?

HOPE IS JESUS SHINING LIGHT INTO THE DARK AREAS OF OUR LIVES

To celebrate advent well, we need to understand that hope is the light of Jesus shining into the dark areas of our lives. It's universal to the human experience to have remaining dark areas in our lives (even after we find Jesus). Hope is about Jesus being there and lighting up that dark area. We've all tried to light up our dark areas ourselves. We don't have the light within us. The light is Jesus. The definition of hope is allowing Jesus into the dark areas in our lives. Upon earnest reflection, we may find areas where we haven't let go and invited Jesus into those areas. Sometimes we have to sit with Jesus and he slowly and progressively lights up those areas of our hearts and souls.

6. What area of your life do you most want to invite Jesus to pour light into this season?

HOPE IS A CHOICE AND SOMETIMES IT'S A CHOICE OF LETTING GO TO LET JESUS SHINE LIGHT IN PAINFUL PLACES

[John 3:19] Faith can be something that causes us to feel good and yet over time find that we still experience hopelessness. This is often because we choose darkness even after choosing Jesus. We can be stuck in a pattern of poor decision-making even if we know the better way. We may choose to keep the light of Jesus hidden. We can choose to believe that our circumstances are the defining factor in what is possible as things aren't going well. As we allow this, we can find ourselves slowly walking away from the light of Jesus. For those of us who have walked in the light and seen how Jesus can change everything, we can yet make choices for darkness in other areas of our lives. Often, this is because we feel like it's predictable or that we have some measure of control. Hope is a choice. The dark areas of our lives will remain in darkness until we choose hope and choose to allow Jesus to take control. Letting go can be painful, but may be necessary to allow Jesus to shine light in our darkness. It can be hard and we might not know what's going to happen, but what we've been doing isn't working, and that's when we need the light of Jesus to give us light.

7. After earnest reflection, where have you been making choices to continue in darkness because you want predictability, comfort or control?