

“Angels, Help us to Adore Him: Week 1”

Meditation Preached by The Rev. Jennifer Cameron

November 29, 2020 – St. Columba Presbyterian Church, Belleville

Hymns for Worship Video – November 29, 2020

“Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus” #110 in the Book of Praise

Come Thou long expected Jesus

Born to set Thy people free

From our fears and sins release us

Let us find our rest in Thee

Israel's strength and consolation

Hope of all the earth Thou art

Dear desire of every nation

Joy of every longing heart

Born Thy people to deliver

Born a child and yet a King

Born to reign in us forever

Now Thy gracious Kingdom bring

By Thine own eternal Spirit

Rule in all our hearts alone

By Thine all sufficient merit

Raise us to Thy glorious throne

Charles Wesley | Rowland Hugh Prichard

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“People in darkness are looking for light” #124 in the Book of Praise

People in darkness are looking for light

Come, come, come Jesus Christ

People with blindness are longing for sight

Come, Lord Jesus Christ

These days of adventure when all people wait

Are days for the advent of love

People with sickness are praying for health

Come, come, come Jesus Christ

People in poverty want to have wealth

Come, Lord Jesus Christ

These days of adventure when all people wait

Are days for the advent of hope

People in trouble would like to be free

Come, come, come Jesus Christ

People with arguments want to agree

Come, Lord Jesus Christ

These days of adventure when all people wait

Are days for the advent of peace

People in sadness are trying to sing
Come, come, come Jesus Christ
Bells in the steeple are waiting to ring
Come, Lord Jesus Christ
These days of adventure when all people wait
Are days for the advent of joy

Closing Chorus “Emmanuel, Emmanuel” #114 in the Book of Praise **sung twice**

Emmanuel Emmanuel
His name is called Emmanuel
God with us revealed in us
His name is called Emmanuel

Bob McGee

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Scripture Text: Revelation 3:1-13

“To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. ³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

⁴ Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. ⁶ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

⁷ “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. ⁸ I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. ⁹ I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars—I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. ¹⁰ Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

¹¹ I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. ¹² The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. ¹³ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Meditation

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, here we are at the end of November. It is the first Sunday in Advent, the beautiful season of preparation as we make our way toward Christmas. Everything is so different this year. My own routine of decorating on this first Sunday of the season was put into action a week earlier. Most of my shopping is being done online. I'm not sipping a tea and people-watching in the mall, one of my favourite things to do at this time of the year. There aren't very many people to watch, and I really don't think I want to be in the mall.

And yet, there is still much to prepare. Worship is planned and put together for Sundays. The Memorial Tree of Lights is ready to be lit and the service will be prepared for us to gather, at a distance from one another, on the church driveway. The main floor of the church is decorated as beautifully as always. The snow tires are on my car, salt for the steps is ready for use, my snow brush is easily at hand. I even bought myself a wireless speaker so we can listen to Christmas music during office hours. That's been a nice added touch this year. There's nothing like hearing Bing Crosby singing Silent Night in the middle of the morning when I need a moment to relax and have a few sips of coffee. Of course, we're also treated to Frosty the Snowman and Rudolph on the YouTube playlist!

This year, as we are all very aware, is different. So, in keeping with the different approach to the holidays that we all must take, I'm taking a different approach to Advent, the season of preparation and anticipation. This year, rather than follow the traditional themes of the Advent Candles, we are going to work our way through the season with John's Revelation to help prepare our hearts and minds for the birth of the Saviour.

When I first stumbled across this idea for an Advent theme, in the periodical "Reformed Worship," I thought it was a strange way to make the journey to Bethlehem. What about Micah and Isaiah? But as I read the passages I began to realize this isn't about us going to Bethlehem, but about Jesus coming to us, again. It's about Christ's kingdom being established on earth as it is in heaven. In Advent, we aren't waiting for the literal birth of Christ. We are waiting to share the beautiful story, a story of fear, scandal, surprise and obedience. Christ has already come to this world, praise God, so we aren't waiting for his birth in the literal sense. We are waiting for God to reveal something to us, something we may not have understood or even known before.

What part of the story will touch us this year?

What preparations will we make in our hearts and lives in anticipation of Christ's coming?

As our Christmas planning is different this year, what different insight to God's promises, fulfilled in Christ, will we gain?

God has the power to surprise us year after year. I don't anticipate this year being any different.

I was reading a letter from the Dean of St. Andrew's Hall, the Presbyterian Church's theological college in Vancouver. The letter was an update on how the school is responding to COVID protocols and keeping the community safe, and a request to consider a financial gift to the school as they feel the same tangible effects of the pandemic as the rest of the church. Within the letter, however, there was an even greater message. Dr. Lockhart wrote, "I have heard it said that 'COVID changes everything,' however as a wise friend of mine said recently, 'As Christians all that matters is that *Easter* changes everything.'... Let us remember in the midst of this current storm that COVID-19 doesn't change everything, *Jesus does*. His risen presence among us gives us hope and encouragement in these troubled times."¹

This is what we remember in this year of doing things differently. We are an Easter people, a resurrection people, people of life. We are still celebrating Christmas, regardless of how we will do that, not

¹ The Rev. Dr. Ross Lockhart, letter to the PCC from St. Andrew's Hall, October 24, 2020.

because the pandemic is forcing us to change, but because everything has been changed by Jesus and his purpose for coming into this world.

Our traditions may have changed, but the reason for them hasn't. It's still about Jesus and his coming to this world.

That's what the letters to the churches in Sardis and Philadelphia are about.

That's what John's Revelation is about.

It was with some nervousness I chose this theme for Advent. Preaching on texts from Revelation can be difficult enough, but to preach on them as we prepare for Christmas? What was I thinking? An article from "Reformed Worship" from 1987 may explain where my mind went as I saw the theme suggested in this year's Advent resources. As the introduction to the theme says, "This Advent series highlights the themes of promise, preparation, joy, and hope with a focus on how angels model worship in both the Nativity story and in Revelation."

The article I read really opened my mind, and my heart, to how anticipation and preparation for Christ's return can be a powerful way to experience Advent, when we prepare to celebrate his coming to this earth as a tiny baby, not a victorious Saviour. *Yet*. This particular article was written by a Pastor in the Reformed Church in America.

"I was startled. The preacher announced that for the first three Sundays of Advent he would preach on the second coming. I felt a rustling of discomfort around me. Don't we have enough to think about in Advent without worrying about the second coming?"

"After all, Advent is the time to soberly and joyfully prepare once again to receive God's gift of Christmas. Advent is the time to remember the ancient promises to Abraham, David, and the prophets. Advent is the time to ready our hearts to celebrate once again the joy of God's incarnation.

"But, as the preacher made clear in the weeks that followed, God's Christmas gift of Jesus is only the beginning of the story. To be sure, it's a glorious beginning, a beginning filled with angel choirs and brilliant stars heralding Jesus' birth. Still, it is only the beginning of the story that continues through the ages. The end of the story, the climax, is still to come. And waiting for the end makes waiting for the replay of the beginning so much richer!"²

This writer went on to outline how our world today has the same problems as it did when Jesus was born.

There are still forces at work against God.

There is still terror.

There is still injustice and inequality.

There is still heartbreak and hardship.

The world outside the doors of the stable was just as filled with strife as the world outside the doors of the church. Although Jesus defeated its final power, evil is still running loose in the world, trying to regain its power.

But Jesus was born to change the world, and he did. One day he will return to complete the transformation, and make our victory in him complete.

Another idea the writer of the article shared was that preaching anticipation for Christ's return "can become a call to greater involvement. We are not able to bring in the kingdom of God. But to us is given the joyful, if difficult, task of preparing the way of the Lord, of doing all we can to level the mountains of injustice and to make straight the erring practices and policies that perpetuate misery in our world. By such

² Carol Westphal, "Enriching our Waiting: Eschatological Preaching in Advent" Reformed Worship, September, 1987. Reformedworship.org

preparations we announce to our world, as John the Baptist did to his, that our Lord is coming again. We call for all to prepare to meet God as Lord and Judge.”³

Finally, the writer gives this note of good news to her thoughts about this theme during Advent: “[it] adds to our coming Christmas joy—the joy of the glorious hope of our faith. Advent and Christmas become more than a season of looking backward and reliving the beginning of God's salvation for us and for our world. They become a season of looking forward to the time when that salvation will be complete, the time when our Christmas Baby will reign forever and ever, the time when he who sits upon the throne of the heavens will say at last, ‘I am making everything new!’ (Rev. 21: 5)”⁴

It’s a different approach to the Advent season, certainly a different one from the kind of theme I would normally choose. But as we keep hearing and saying, this year is anything but normal. It seems fitting, therefore, to be reminded that there is tremendous joy in the birth of the Christ Child. There is also tremendous joy in the coming return of Christ. We anticipate both in this season!

As we have been trudging our way through the pandemic that has gripped the world for the past year, and kept our own nation on lockdown and alert for the past nine months, we have wondered when it will end. We have remembered how things used to be and hoped for their return. We have created new ways of celebrating, engaged in different ways of grieving, waited for a solution to the problem, and wondered when it will be over. We have spent a lot of time in the moment, and in missing what used to be. And we have done it together – not in physical gatherings, but by our connectedness by faith in Christ. As we hold onto the faith, as we cling to the hope it brings, as we wait for the story of the coming of the Prince of Peace, we have a wonderful opportunity to look forward to the time when there will be absolutely nothing to stand in his way or the way of his people. As we anticipate the Christmas story, we can also anticipate the rest of the story. Each of us is a part of that story, and God is its author. We don’t know what the future holds, of course, but we do know God has promised one for us and knows exactly how it will play out.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches, we read in these letters to churches in Revelation. The angels of the church in Sardis and Philadelphia were told to keep people alert to the time of Jesus’ return, to encourage them in their faithfulness and steadfastness in the face of evil, and to assure the faithful that they would be protected from the time of terrible trial. Their patience and endurance for the sake of Christ in this world would save them, and God’s name would be written on them as a protection.

Friends, this is a time when we must continue to have patience and endurance, not just because we are living through a pandemic, but because we live in a world that continues to see conflict between light and darkness, Christ and the evil one. But we have something to look forward to, even when we feel frustrated and anxious about all that is changing. As the promised Messiah’s arrival was heralded by angels, the promise of his return will be heralded when the trumpet sounds and the angels descend singing his praise and glory. We don’t know when, but we do know our faithfulness will keep us close to him by his Spirit until that time. Our faithfulness will be rewarded with the gift of the most perfect, joyful life, the life we will receive when salvation is complete and evil is not only defeated, but destroyed. Now that is a gift worth waiting for.

In the expression of faith “Our World Belongs to God,” we read these selected statements about Christ’s return:

We long for that day when Jesus will return as triumphant King...

He will heal our hurts, end our wars, and make the crooked straight...

God will be all in all, righteousness and peace will flourish,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

everything will be made new, and every eye shall see at last
that our world belongs to God!
Hallelujah! Come, Lord Jesus.⁵

Perhaps that would be a good way to end each of these sermons, because we all need to rejoice in God's promises – those already fulfilled, and those we anticipate with faithfulness and trust.
Hallelujah! Come *again* Lord Jesus. Amen.

⁵ Adapted from Our World Belongs to God, 56–57.