*Note: This sermon may be adapted to meet your congregation’s needs, your preaching style, and preferred time length*

**Sermon 1 - The Star: A Journey of Hope**

[Show Hope Bumper video.]

[Optional: Show the Kids’ Advent Series promotional video. If the children in your church will be doing the lessons based on the major motion picture *The Star*, you may also want to show the weekly movie clip for the whole congregation to enjoy together.]

Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent. What an amazing season it is as we journey together toward Christmas. The word *advent* is a version of a Latin term which means “coming.” So we use these weeks leading up to Christmas as a chance to look forward to our celebration of the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, the light of the world, our Savior. Advent is a season of great expectation, and I’m glad you’re here with us today as we embark on a journey—actually join in an epic journey that began more than two thousand years ago—and follow the star and discover the light of the world. It’s a journey of the heart and soul, but it’s also a journey that will realign our expectations and experience of the Christmas season. And it’s a journey that will explore the gifts of Christmas delivered by and through Christ: hope, love, joy, and peace. We all need hope in the storms of life and love that never gives up. We need fresh joy on our journey and peace no matter what we’re facing or dealing with.

Our journey and series will center on the star as our guiding light. Now, the Star of Bethlehem has taken a central place in the Christmas story, but its mention in the Bible is really very brief. The record of wise men from the East who followed a star is only mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel account of Christ’s coming (Matthew 2). And there is much discussion by scholars and scientists about what the star actually was, who the wise men were, and when the cosmic event of its appearance took place. But apart from the debates, there remains the truth that the light of a star led people to Jesus, even if they were still on their journey the night Jesus was born. (Most scholars place the wise men showing up a few months to a year after Jesus’s birth.) You see, the star then and now is a guide that ultimately leads to Jesus, the light of the world.

As we embark on this journey this Advent season, I want to encourage all of us to look for the light. The Advent season is about the journey as much as the destination. As we’ll explore, it is a time to prepare, maybe to pause and to ponder, to breathe deeply and turn our eyes to the true meaning of this time of year—a season that can seem so hectic and stressful in our culture.

No matter where you find yourself today, you are invited into this journey. Think about the people who were part of the journey toward the first Christmas—Mary, Joseph, an innkeeper, a jealous king, some wise men, common shepherds, angels, and so many more. While the pace of our lives would probably make their heads spin, each of these people were facing daily difficulties that we would want no part of. They didn’t have all the answers. They hadn’t spent hours getting ready and making sure they were prepared for the supernatural events awaiting them. They didn’t even understand what was happening all the time—even when angels appeared or a star guided their path. But all of the Christmas story cast answered God’s invitation to come and see the arrival of His Son, the light of the world and the Savior of all.

Will you say yes to the journey? Will you peer through the darkness of your life, no matter what that may be, and look for the glimmer of hope? Will you step toward the light of the star even if your vision seems cloudy or muddled? Will you journey toward Bethlehem, drawn by hope for the love, joy, and peace that await?

Is that a difficult vision for you? Does your night seem cloudy? Is your Christmas season overwhelmed already by any number of struggles: financial stresses, relational dysfunctions, memories of loss, commercialized expectations? We’ve all been there at some time or another. We may be there now in some form or another.

But let me encourage you—that’s exactly where hope shines brightest.

How do we follow the star on a journey of hope? How can we purposefully live this season of anticipation in light of hope?

I’d like to suggest it starts with acknowledging the darkness around us, embracing the wait, and committing to the journey.

**1. Acknowledge the Darkness**

I have here with me a flashlight. [Turn on a flashlight and shine it around.]

Right now it doesn’t seem too exciting. It’s actually kind of hard to even see the light it puts out. However, if we found ourselves in complete darkness, we might feel very differently about this little gadget.

[Have all the lights turned off so the room is completely dark. Give everyone a minute for the darkness to sink in.]

Wow! It’s dark in here. If we all had to find our way to the front or to an exit, it would be tough!

[Turn on the flashlight.]

Now, surrounded by darkness, see how much light this flashlight gives? It suddenly looks much brighter when it shines in the darkness. It could actually make the difference in being able to find our way or not.

[Turn the lights back on.]

It’s kind of amazing that God chose a star to guide the wise men to Bethlehem. Throughout the Bible, we see how God uses His own creation to reveal Himself to us. The psalmist put it beautifully in Psalm 19:1–4 which says, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”

And Psalm 8 says, “When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?” (Psalm 8:3–4).

God’s glory is seen in the stars. But the thing about stars is they can’t be seen in the light. It’s the same as that flashlight—on a much more celestial scale. They are there, but we can’t see them. In fact, they are seen best on the darkest of nights, when there is no moonlight, away from the lights of the city. The darker the setting, the brighter the starlight.

This time of year, holiday glitz can artificially light our lives. Or we may seek out our own flashing distractions to try to distract us from the gnawing darkness within. But facing the darkness and calling it what it is allows us to see true light. It’s when we acknowledge the darkness that we can see the star that leads us on the journey.

As we journey together toward Christmas this Advent season, let’s be honest about the darkness we find ourselves in—both darkness in the world around us and darkness within our own hearts. We live in a world full of darkness and fear, but it is into that great darkness that an even greater star appears to light the way.

The Bible tells us that it was also a pretty dark time for the people of Israel when Jesus showed up. The Old Testament prophets had prophesied of a Messiah, but it had been a long wait—hundreds of years of waiting. “Therefore the Lord himself will give youa sign: The virginwill conceive and give birth to a son, andwill call him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

Isaiah talked about the coming light and the present darkness, and that darkness continued to grow through the centuries. “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:2).

Both of these verses were spoken long before Jesus was born. The people of Israel lived in that space between promise and fulfillment. Looking back, it’s easy for us to see how the first Passover, when God spared the firstborns of the Israelites in Egypt and set them free from slavery, foreshadowed the coming of Jesus, the Passover lamb. But the people of Israel didn’t have the benefit of hindsight. They were desperate for a deliverer. Honestly, many of them thought God had forgotten them, especially as they lived under Roman oppression in the time of Herod.

Today we share that common experience of darkness and desperation. Nothing can rescue us except God. And the beauty of the journey of hope is that we see, in what seems to be the darkest hour, God shows up. We can find and continue to draw hope, knowing that Jesus entered our darkness that first Christmas. His Spirit will fan even the smallest spark of hope within us and draw us onward toward vibrant daily hope rooted in the work of Christ to overwhelm the darkness of sin and death.

It’s not an instant process, but it’s a real process that gives us what we need through the journey.

**2. Embrace the Wait**

Who likes waiting? Does *anyone* like waiting?

We live in a culture that does everything possible to reduce the amount of time we spend waiting! I don’t think most of us would do very well living in the days of the Israelites. The people of Israel in the Bible knew all about the long wait. Since Genesis, in the very first book of the Bible, when sin entered the world, we see that God offered the promise of hope. In Genesis 3:14–15, God cursed the serpent that tempted Eve and said that through her offspring will come one who will crush the serpent. This was Jesus, the source of hope from the very beginning. God had a plan of hope from the start. But constrained by the time of our world, the waiting seemed like forever.

Imagine a farmer standing on the dry dust of a parched field and looking up to the sky. Years of drought have taken everything from him, and he has lost hope. But then, in the distance, he hears the rumble of thunder—the promise of rain. That is the image John the Baptist gave of himself when people asked if he was the Messiah. No, he was not, but he was announcing the arrival of the long-awaited one. He was the herald of hope. “I’m thunder in the desert: ‘Make the road straight for God!’” he cried (John 1:23, msg).

Advent is a time of waiting. While it feels unnatural, there is great benefit in embracing this season as we anticipate the coming of Jesus. The waiting reminds us of where our hope is set. It allows us the time and focus to hear the distant rumble of thunder, the promise that our hope will be fulfilled.

And while we wait to celebrate Jesus’s birth, we also wait for our true hope to be fulfilled when Jesus comes again. This will be the ultimate fulfillment of our deepest hopes. The apostle John described it this way: “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. . . . They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:9, 16–17, esv).

We still live in the space between the already and the not yet. And so our challenge is to embrace the waiting with hope—and to allow that hope to carry us through the wait. You could say that hope fuels our very faith. It draws us onward, giving us expectation that our belief and longing will be fulfilled as God has promised. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

Will you allow this Advent season to serve as a reminder of the confidence we have as we wait in hope for what we do not yet see? Will you seek the light of the star, no matter how faintly it might first appear to you, and draw hope from its growing light?

**3. Commit to the Journey**

I don’t know about you, but my natural images of waiting and journeying are different. One involves sitting around; one involves moving. But the concept of waiting throughout the Bible is one of active waiting. We wait with expectant hearts, but we are constantly moving forward on our journey.

Priest, professor, writer, and theologian, Henri J. M. Nouwen described the waiting we see in Scripture as very active. In *Waiting for God*, he wrote, “Active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it.”

What an excellent description of Advent! Waiting means being active, present in the moment while still anticipating where we are going. That’s not easy! It takes strength and courage, but those we can draw from the very source of our hope. As the psalmist encouraged: “Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the Lord” (Psalm 31:24).

So what does that look like in real life? Peter gave us a glimpse when he said, “Therefore, with minds that are alert and fully sober, set your hope on the grace to be brought to you when Jesus Christ is revealed at his coming” (1 Peter 1:13).

Hope is about waiting, but that waiting involves a commitment to being present in our journey of obedience. *Alert, sober*—these are words of expectation and active anticipation. The good news in all this is that wherever you are on your journey, it’s okay—keep following God’s light. Sure, we have four weeks of Advent that lead to Christmas, but that is human-created calendar timing, not God’s timing.

Advent is about a deadline to have to get prepared by. It’s not about finding all the answers or checking all the boxes. It is about preparing. You just have to show up and be willing to follow God’s lead. Wherever you are, you are not too late. God’s timing is perfect. And He wants to fill your heart with hope for the ultimate healing and life in His Son.

That is a reason for hope that will fuel your journey through Advent and far beyond.

**Prayer:** *God, thank You that You enter into the darkness of our world and of our hearts with light. Help us during this season of Advent to live with expectant hope as we wait for the birth of Christ at Christmas and for the complete fulfillment of hope when Christ comes again. Amen.*

**Benediction:** “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit!” (Romans 15:13)