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

**The Gifts of Christmas Advent Series**

**Sermon 1: The Gift of Hope**

Do you ever feel like Charlie Brown? In the midst of the Christmas decorations that have been up since Halloween, the Christmas songs stuck in your head, the lights and shopping and cookies and parties—do you ever want to just stand up and shout in exasperation like Charlie Brown, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?!”

I’m sure you’ve seen the classic TV special *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It’s been airing since 1965. That’s a pretty good run! Especially for a cartoon that was produced on a low budget and what was basically a last-minute production schedule for animation. It all came about when Coca-Cola came looking for a Christmas special to sponsor for holiday marketing. The cartoon *Peanuts* was wildly popular, so they asked for a meeting and ideas. *Peanuts* creator Charles Schulz and the producers threw together an outline in a day, and the Coke execs went for it. Schulz had some unorthodox ideas, like a jazz soundtrack and no laugh track, which was a staple of TV shows in that era. Most of all, he was adamant that the true Christmas story be presented, complete with a scene read straight from the Bible. The TV producers worried that it would be too controversial to read the Bible on national television, but Schulz insisted. Controversial or not, you could say the show has done pretty well.

And you’ve probably seen it a time or two. If so, you know that Charlie Brown is surrounded by all the trappings of Christmas, but they all come up empty. When he wonders aloud what Christmas is really about, his best friend Linus sets him straight with a clear answer straight from Luke 2:8–14. Linus recites the passage in one of the most poignant scenes in television history:

And there were in the same county shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (kjv)

In those words, Charlie Brown finds hope. It’s where the whole Christmas experience turns for him and good ol’ Chuck realizes the true meaning of Christmas. He goes from depressed by the season to inspired by it. He goes from an inward focus of questioning to an outward focus of sharing the season with others.

Today I invite you to hear the same words of hope as we enter the season of Advent in expectation for Christmas. Over the next four weeks, we will unwrap the gifts of Christmas as we journey through the Advent season. It is our chance to listen to the stories, to remember the true meaning of Christmas, to wait in expectation for the arrival of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. The point is not to get rid of the trappings and traditions and celebrations all around us but to take a purposeful journey through them to more deeply experience the gifts of Christmas: hope, love, peace, and joy.

**Entering Advent**

So what exactly is Advent? For some, this concept may be new. You may only know Advent from a calendar with little windows that open up revealing a gift or treat for each day of the month leading up to Christmas. But Advent is so much more.

The word *Advent* means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing. Advent is not just an extension of Christmas—it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming. Advent looks back upon Christ’s coming in celebration, while at the same time looking forward in eager anticipation to the coming of Christ’s kingdom when He returns for His people. Hope fulfilled in Jesus. And hope still to be completed in Jesus’s second coming. During Advent we wait for both—active, assured waiting.

As part of the church calendar in many denominations, there are some differences in the way people celebrate Advent. While the core is the same, some of the traditions and practices vary. One of the common traditions of Advent is the lighting of the candles on an Advent wreath. A circular evergreen wreath represents God’s unending love for us. And the lighting of five candles throughout the season—one for each of the four Sundays before Christmas and one on Christmas Eve—represents Jesus’s coming to a world lost in darkness. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “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).

As we celebrate with our own Advent wreath this season, we will light an additional candle each week. Each flame brings us closer to the arrival of the true Light of the world, born in Bethlehem.

In a season often marked by frenzied busyness, Advent is an opportunity to set aside time to prepare our hearts and help us place our focus on a far greater story than our own—the story of God’s redeeming love for our world. It’s not a season of pretending or covering over—it is a season of digging deep into the reality of what it means that God sent His Son into the world. It is a season of expectation and preparation, an opportunity to align ourselves with God’s *presence* more than just the hectic season of *presents*. So wherever you are on your own spiritual journey, I invite you into this season. It’s a time that allows for questions and doubt and struggle as we take time to prepare our hearts for Christ’s coming.

Advent is not a celebration that God comes to fix things—from broken computers to broken families to broken and hurting lives. Rather, simply, Advent is a celebration that God comes. In the darkness, in the pain, in the chaos, He comes. And He makes a way.

As we unwrap each gift of Christmas over then next few weeks, my hope is that we discover together that we can trust in Immanuel, God with us. He is bigger than our greatest expectations or our deepest pains. His light shines in the darkness and bids us to draw near. As we do, we discover and realize the gifts He brings—but more so, we discover Him.

This first Sunday in Advent, we focus on hope. So let’s start by looking at what we mean by hope. What statements do you typically hear people make that involve hope?

• I hope it doesn’t rain.

• I hope I get the job.

• I hope the world will be at peace.

• I hope he gets better.

• I hope she shows up.

• I hope . . . (you fill in the blank).

Do you notice a theme? Worldly hope is characterized by doubt, uncertainty, and a lack of control. We hope for things that may or may not happen. But in Jesus, hope is a guarantee, a sure thing. Our hope is actually a “know-so” rather than a “maybe-so.” Let’s unwrap this gift of hope by looking at hope past, hope present, and hope future as we journey toward Christmas.

1. **Hope Past**

What is the longest you’ve waited for something? Is there anything you’ve been waiting for your entire life? The people of Israel knew all about waiting. Their entire history was marked by waiting as they looked forward to the coming of a Messiah who would set them free. The Old Testament is full of prophecies about this Messiah. Isaiah 7:14 is one example: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”

#### And another well-known prophecy from Isaiah promises, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

#### These and other prophecies gave a clear expectation of God’s promised Messiah—hundreds of years before the arrival of the Messiah. The promise didn’t always make the waiting easy. As we prepare for Jesus’s coming this Christmas, we share in the waiting of the people of Israel. Like them, most of us have situations and circumstances in our own lives that make it difficult for us to wait on God. And like them, we still wait for the complete fulfillment of God’s salvation for the world. Yes, many prophecies were fulfilled in Jesus’s coming, but others are yet to be completed when He comes again.

So what can purposeful waiting this Advent season do for us? As we look back on hope past, we gain confidence and renew our faith in God’s promises to us. Hebrews 11:1 says, “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.”

We can find confidence in the fulfillment of Christ’s arrival—and in all He has done in our lives over time. But we can also find assurance that there is much more to come—that God will complete His good work in you and me and that He will fulfill His promises to make all things new and complete in the end. Let this season be a journey of building confident hope as you wait for His coming.

**2. Hope Present**

In the first chapter of Luke, we see Jesus’s birth foretold again. But unlike the Old Testament prophecies, this is a much more personal and imminent foretelling. The angel Gabriel appears to Mary and tells her about the coming of Jesus.

In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be calledthe Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May your word to me be fulfilled.” Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26–38)

In the midst of life’s questions, do you ever find yourself wishing that Gabriel would just show up and let you know what to expect? I mean, wouldn’t it be easier to just know?

Well, maybe.

But in Mary’s case, perhaps it would have been easier *not* to know. What do you do with information like this? Mary was given a direct message from the angel Gabriel, but even (maybe especially) then it took faith to place her trust and hope in God. Thankfully, Mary responded in faith and held fast to the hope of the promise of Immanuel, God with us.

Today, as we begin Advent, we know and hold fast to that hope. Jesus has come and made a way for us to be one with God, through His forgiveness of our sin. His coming changes everything. As you sit here today, the present hope you hold on to may not *seem* to be changing things. Your heart and mind may be flooded with the concerns and stresses and hardships you face. Any signs of change in your circumstances may be slim to none.

That doesn’t mean change isn’t happening. It doesn’t mean God isn’t working behind the scenes, inside other people or situations. It doesn’t mean He isn’t working inside our hearts to teach and shape us. Regardless of what outward results look like at any given moment, we can find hope in the words of Hebrews 6:19, “We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”

Our present hope in Jesus doesn’t stop the storms of life. It doesn’t change the immediate situations we face. But like an anchor holds a ship steady against the wind and the waves, our hope holds us firm and secure in the midst of life’s storms. Let this season be one of secure hope in the midst of whatever storms you face.

**3. Hope Future**

While our focus leading up to Christmas is naturally on the birth of Jesus and His arrival in our world, Advent is also about the future. Advent is not just about preparing our hearts for Christmas but also about preparing our hearts for when Christ comes again. And you may find that waiting patiently for the second coming of Jesus is even harder than waiting for Christmas. We long for the time when all will be restored and made new. We experience the pain and suffering of today and wait in eager hope for the future. That is where our hope lies: that the baby who was born in a stable in Bethlehem will return again and complete the work of God in our world. And so we wait, placing our hope in Him for the past, the present, and the future. It’s the bigger picture of our faith and of God’s plans for our world. The apostle Paul explained, “For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently” (Romans 8:24–25).

It’s hard to be patient. It’s hard to wait. But I encourage you to lean in and unwrap the gift of hope today. No matter what the department stores try to tell you, Christmas has not yet arrived. This is Advent—a season of preparation, waiting, expectation. There is value as well as excitement in patient and expectant waiting. May this be a season of wonder as you discover the gifts Jesus offers to you this Christmas: hope, love, joy, and peace.

**Prayer:** *God, thank You that in this season of Advent we can unwrap Your gift of hope. Help us to remember hope past, hold tightly to hope in our present realities, and wait with expectation for hope to be fulfilled when Christ comes again.*

**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)