

Rediscover Christmas

Advent Week 1: Finding Hope in Our Uncertainties

Where were you when? Every generation has its “where were you when” question about some cultural seismic event. Where were you when Neil Armstrong landed on the moon? Where were you when you heard JFK or Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot and killed? Where were you when you heard about Columbine? Where were you on 9/11? Some of those examples pre-date many of us, but we all have a new one we can share: Where were you when you first realized this coronavirus was for real?

Moments like these are big. They change things. There’s no going back. Culture shifts. Our lives are never the same. Unfortunately, many of these tend to be negative events, catastrophes, or tragedies. They strike with no warning and introduce a new sense of uncertainty into our lives.

Is this sounding familiar? Welcome to 2020, anyone? Wow, what a year! Has there ever been a year filled with more uncertainty? At least in our lifetimes? This one has to rank in the all-time top 10 of unexpected happenings and uncertain events due to its ongoing uncertainty. You could write a sci-fi novel or movie straight out of the headlines – either that or the headlines have been straight out of a sci-fi thriller. You know what’s on the list. We’ve all been living it for almost a full year: global pandemic, economic recession, mass unemployment, political division, cultural

upheaval, racial reckoning, record wildfires, complete with fire tornados, extra-powerful hurricanes, and floods. Did I miss anything?

If it's not the new word of the year officially, it should be — doomscrolling. It's perfectly fitting that this new word was added to our lexicon this year. You know, it's that scroll through your news feed on social media on your phone, just thumbing through the headlines. We've probably all done it. Hopefully, we've all caught ourselves and learned to limit the doomscrolling before bed. It's enough to sink anyone into depression.

I'm not trying to bring us down here. Quite the opposite. But this is the reality we've all been living with for quite some time. It's been a tough year. If there's ever a year we need Christmas, this is it. If there's ever a year we need the hope of Christmas, this is it. If there's ever a year we need Christ, my friends, this is that year.

It's a good thing we've made it here — to Advent, nearly to Christmas!

Entering Advent

This is a season of hope. Advent is all about hope. The word Advent means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is traditionally a time of 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 in celebration at the hope fulfilled in Jesus's coming, while at the same time looking forward in hopeful and eager anticipation to the coming of Christ's kingdom when He returns for His people. During Advent we wait for both—it's an active, assured, and hopeful waiting.

Far too often, our Christmases have become frenzied and overwhelmingly busy. We pack our schedules with so many seasonal happenings. Our stores start pushing Christmas decor and merchandise and fueling a gift-buying frenzy in October. Our season of peace is quickly overloaded as a season of stress.

But Advent is an opportunity to set all that aside. Advent is a 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 to be happy or covering up the pain or hardships we have experienced during the past year or continue to experience—it is a season of digging deep into the reality of what it means that God sent His Son into the world to be Immanuel, God With Us. 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 level of 2020 anxiety and uncertainty, wherever you are on your own spiritual journey, I invite you into this

season of Advent. I'd like to even suggest that in the craziness and uncertainty and pandemic of this year, we've been given a gift. We've been given the opportunity to rediscover Christmas.

For the next four weeks, we're going to be exploring the attributes of Christ encapsulated in His birth and the Christmas season: hope, peace, joy, and love. And on Christmas Eve, we will celebrate the arrival of Jesus, the Christ. Today we begin with rediscovering the hope of Christmas, even when we are surrounded by uncertainty.

Simeon and Anna: Keeping Hope Alive

As we explore these themes of Advent over the next four weeks, we'll see how they relate to and are exemplified in different characters of the biblical Christmas story. But first, let's cover a little background to the times these people were living in.

We think we have it bad today, but, you know, so did Israel back in the days of the Bible. And they could make a pretty good case during the time of Jesus, when they, like much of the world, were a defeated nation under the thumb of the Roman Empire. It was a harsh day to live in, a time of conquest and brutality. It had been thousands of years since the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and the calling out of God's people. It had been thousands of years of being invaded and conquered by enemies like the Assyrians and Babylonians, and then the massive empires of the Greeks and Romans. It had been generations and generations since the formation

of God's covenant with humanity, promising a Messiah to make things right, to bless humans and restore all that we humans had messed up since God's perfect Creation.

The fulfillment of God's Covenant and the coming of the Messiah who would come to make everything right wasn't just a happy idea that drifted in and out of the Israelites' consciousness and culture. It was their deepest hope that sustained them and encouraged them and spurred them on, especially through thousands of years of uncertain waiting. They clung to God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (NIV).

But "How long, O God?" was the cry of the ancient Israelite people. And how long can hope survive? Especially under the world-changing forces of the Greek and Roman Empires, whose cultures we are still influenced by today. Were there even embers of hope left smoldering?

As we see in Luke's biblical Christmas story, the answer is yes.

Spoiler alert: Jesus, the Messiah, is born at that first Christmas. I know that's no surprise, but I tell you that because I'm going to pick up Luke's narrative in an unusual place.

Most of the time, we end our Christmas story narrative with Mary and Joseph and Jesus in the stable. The shepherds come and visit and go back to

their flocks in the field. Sure, we sneak the Magi into the Nativity because it's more convenient to get everybody together for one last group number in the Christmas pageant. We all sing "Silent Night" and roll the credits.

And, OK, Luke's Christmas narrative does end the night of Jesus's birth with the shepherds' departure – not the three kings, mind you – but the next, ongoing scene in Luke's story comes right after it. And I'd like for us to look a little more closely today at that scene, and specifically its characters, Simeon and Anna.

Let's read Luke's account together from Luke 2:22-38:

When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of

the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:22-38, NIV)

Simeon and Anna were sparks of hope in Israel. More than that, they were torches of hope, expecting God to come through and do what He had promised. They believed this! They were waiting for this!

Both Simeon and Anna are likewise elders in this story. They have both lived long lives. They have seen and experienced many things, both hardship for their people and pain in their own lives. We know Anna specifically has been a widow for decades, a position of low social status in that culture. But we know both Simeon and Anna have remained faithfully devoted to God. They are ready to see God act and do great things.

Did you notice in Luke's account that neither Simeon nor Anna seem the least bit surprised or uncertain about the fact that this baby, Jesus, is the long-promised Messiah?

Almost everyone else in the Christmas story so far has taken a little convincing about the whole arrangement. Granted, many of the others had an angel appear with a heavenly announcement, and it caught them off guard, if not made them completely terrified, at first. Maybe God knew Simeon and Anna might just have heart attacks on the spot if an angel appeared, but I think it's more than that. I think God didn't need an angel to get the message to these two faith-giants. They were ready. They were tuned in, waiting, watching, listening, expecting. They were filled with hope, and that hope made them ready.

Day after day, year after year, Simeon and Anna had served God faithfully, inspired and fueled by the hope that God was at work. Even though they couldn't see it. Even if they were surrounded by hardship. Even as time passed and they grew older and older. Simeon and Anna still held onto hope. And they fostered new and renewed hope as they set their focus on God, worshiping Him, serving Him, serving others, taking one step faithfully at a time as they waited.

"Of course God came through!" they might have said. "This is what He said He would do. The Messiah is here!" And they rejoiced and celebrated and infused new hope into the people around them, including Mary and Joseph who were still figuring out just what it meant to be the earthly parents of God's Son, Jesus, the Messiah.

Simeon and Anna reveal several things about hope and its power that we can take away and apply in our lives.

1. Hope sees beyond.

Hope is the fuel of faith. And dreams. And possibilities. Hope is that whisper of *maybe, just maybe*. It's the spark in the cold darkness that catches flame. It's the flicker of first light on a new morning.

No matter how bad your year has been, no matter what kind of problems and struggles you are facing right now, no matter what kind of season of

darkness and pain you are in, let me encourage you not to abandon hope. Hope is still alive even in our deepest pain and most hopeless circumstances. Hope chases away the darkness and uncertainty. Hope is alive because God is with us.

Romans 8 is a well-known chapter in the Bible, but there's a section of it that often gets overlooked. In this chapter, Paul starts off clarifying that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1, NIV). He then explains our relationship as God's children and what it looks like to live by God's Spirit. Then he shifts to our future when God will fulfill His work in us and restore all of creation. And here in verses 24-26, he says this:

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. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. (Romans 8:24-26, NIV)

Let me reread part of that again. "Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?"

You see, hope exists before reality comes to pass. You can hope with all your heart that I really have a \$100 bill here in my pocket and that I might take it out and give it to you right here on the spot. You can think about it. You can expect it. You can tell yourself to keep believing that it is going to

happen. You can hope that you will be \$100 richer walking out of this service today. But as soon as I give you this \$100 bill, hope is done. There's no need for it. You can't keep hoping it will happen because it already has. Now, you can hope I'm really going to let you keep it. Just kidding, now you can accept it as a fact of reality that already happened.

But hope precedes our present reality. Hope, by its very nature, exists in the uncertainty before. It exists in questions. In doubts even. In that unclear sense of what is to come. But hope is the willingness and desire to believe beyond what our present circumstances and reality are presenting to us.

Now, I included the beginning of verse 26 in our Romans reading because I think it's vitally important. "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness."

Because that leads us into our second point —

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