

## **Welcome**

Welcome by the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ!

Thank you for joining us online. We want this to be a safe place for you to know and experience God’s love and grace. If we can help you on the next step of your spiritual journey, please reach out to us to email, on Facebook or give us a call.

## **Our Advent Prayer<sup>1</sup>**

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near -

Turn back toward God, because heaven is right around the corner.

Turn back to God, because the possibility of deep and abiding joy  
is very near.

Turn back toward God, because Christ is coming.

Turn back toward God, so you can free yourselves from the false  
expectations of culture and consumerism.

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: [www.gbod.org](http://www.gbod.org)

**Message: TURN**

**I have some good news!** I sat down and worked it out. As of today, there are only 208 shopping days left until Christmas in July!!

**All kidding aside, we're in an unusual time.** We're at the start of the church year, marked by the season of Advent. This year, we have four Sunday services, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, all on Sunday. That means we get to decide whether we'll attend church on days when we'd normally be home or visiting family, wearing fuzzy slippers and relaxing while we watch our loved ones open their gifts. Some of us might even be thinking about catching a nap after late night, "jolly old" activities. Yeah, we'll celebrate Christmas, though we may feel torn between the comforts of our home versus church.

**Outside the walls of the church, the world is in a different place.** It's Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah and winter solstice all wrapped up in one celebration. To our neighbors, it's the end of the year, Black Friday, Santa Claus, Rudolph and Auld Ang Syn. It's the end of finals, winter break and kids home from school. We celebrate, hoping for a break from work and stress for a day or two. Sadly, all too often, the holidays aren't a time of peace or rest.

**Those two descriptions overlap, don't they?** That's because the church isn't isolated from the world. We do the same things our neighbors do. We just do it with a different motivation. We imagine a picture perfect time when we gather with friends, sing favorite songs of the season and remember good times of past years with family. We decorate the house with lights, ornaments and a tree. We have parties with strange rituals like the white elephant gift exchange.

**Our culture celebrates the season.** It doesn't matter whether you believe in Jesus or not. We all dive in and have a holiday. The problem is we often end up feeling like we're missing something. We know the point of Christmas is that Jesus, the Son of God, was born on earth. That's big news. But somehow, in the yuletide madness, we forget the real meaning of Christmas or only find it right before the "big day." By that time, Christ's birth feels more like a present from an aunt or uncle, rather than the dream gift we've been waiting weeks to open.

**I probably don't need to tell you, but Christmas isn't a time of celebration for everyone.** Whether we feel like it or not, there's an expectation we'll be cheerful, grateful and happy on Christmas Day. But that's not the case for everyone. When I became a pastor, it was a big surprise to learn how often Christmas is associated with death, loneliness and depression. Many years, as I'm preparing for Christmas services, I'm preparing for memorial services as well. During the season of light, peace and joy there is darkness, conflict and sadness. Death doesn't take a holiday.

**And, in many households, this season is anything but peaceful.** From the empty chair at the table, to the inevitable arguments, to the person we have to be careful to tiptoe around, Christmas is often just one more, stressful day. We're glad when it's over so we can move on.

**Truth be told, there are a lot of lonely people on Christmas Day.** There are those who have no home or family, those on the streets or in care facilities. Being with family or with a crowd is no guarantee; as many of you know it's possible to be lonely even when we're with our spouse. This juxtaposition of life and death, light and dark, loneliness and companionship reflects the nature of the world Jesus came to.

**So I pause and wonder: what is Christmas?** What does Advent mean to each of us? After all, the Christ child isn't actually reborn each year. And it's not like we're sitting in actual darkness, waiting for the sun to begin to shine, hoping darkness won't return again. That's a closer analogy, but it doesn't really explain what's happening, does it? Christmas is more than a winter celebration. After all, people in the southern hemisphere are celebrating the beginning of summer.

**If you look at the Scriptures for Advent, you find the same apparent paradox.** On one hand, we hear the message of John the Baptist crying out, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near*" (Matthew 3:2). We read Paul's words, "*Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people*" (Romans 15:10). Isaiah prophesies about one who will be a signal to people of all nations, who live in a wonderfully strange place, where all people and animals live in safety, free from suffering and harm (Isaiah 11:1-10).

**Repent, rejoice and be at peace.** Could anything be more confusing?

**What does Christmas mean?** I thought and prayed about this question a lot this week. The Bible keeps leading me back to holiness. Christmas is a holy time. Christmas is important because holiness is the golden thread connecting peace, rejoicing and turning back to God (repentance). We find peace and a reason for rejoicing when we encounter holy God. Christmas is the time of year when God makes it easier for us to experience his presence, to believe God is real. Christmas is God’s time when our hearts are prepared so we can receive the greatest gift of all.

**What is holiness?** The basic meaning is “set apart” or “dedicated” to God – to *belong* to God. YHWH says, “*I will be your God, and you will be my people*” (Hebrews 8:10). So holiness is more than legalism or moral behavior. When God is present, we’re made holy. We can’t be holy on our own. We have to belong to God to be made holy. Advent prepares us to be shocked: a baby was Immanuel, God with us. God’s glory, holiness and presence came to us in a still, quiet way. God makes a claim on our hearts and waits to see how we respond. Will our hearts turn to God or will we continue on our own way? Holiness cannot be present where sin dominates, so the path we choose makes a difference.

**‘Be holy, because I am holy,’ says our Lord (1 Peter 1:16).** “Holiness isn’t primarily about moral purity. First, it’s about union with God in Christ and sharing in Christ’s holiness. Then it’s about a life in grateful service to God and others. Only a Christ-centered holiness will guard us from moral traps and help us recover our spiritual footing today.

**God’s call to be holy is a radical, all-encompassing claim on our lives, our loves, and our very identities.** To be a disciple of Jesus Christ requires nothing less than death to our fallen, egocentric selves so we might live in and for him. *‘For whoever wants to save his life will lose it,’* says Jesus, *‘but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a [person] to gain the whole world, yet forfeit [their] soul?’* (Mark 8:35-36). To be holy means that all we are and all we have belongs to God. Every aspect of our lives is to be shaped and directed toward God.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/bible-answers/theology/what-does-god-mean-when-he-asks-us-to-be-holy.html?start=2>

**I’ll bet you never heard the expression: “Repent, turn to the Lord, Christmas is at hand!”**<sup>3</sup> It’s from the devotional Love is a Verb.

James Bell remembered a time when his pastor shared the origins of the season of Advent with his congregation. You may be surprised to learn Advent was originally seen as a period of repentance.

**We normally think of repentance during the season of Lent.**

Fasting, self-denial and cleansing are all marks of penitence, the things we do as we move toward Good Friday and Easter. But Christmas?

“The early church saw ‘making room’ in their hearts during Advent as a cleansing process. When the Christ child ‘arrived’ on Christmas, the room in their hearts would be swept clean of habitual sins. They’d be more ready and fit to celebrate Christ’s arrival.”<sup>4</sup>

**This idea of making room in our hearts is a good one.** It’s a good practice year around, but particularly now when our focus is so heavily on the superficial and not what has real meaning: our relationships.

**Can anyone honestly say the gifts you receive this year are worth more than the people who give them to you?** Is the toy more important than the parent? Is the beautiful clothing worth more than a sibling? Is the jewelry of greater value than the partner? And, if we value our earthly relationships, how much more important is our relationship with God than the holiday? God’s presence doesn’t depend on gifts, words, candles or gestures. Those are what we use to get ourselves ready. God waits for us patiently, encouraging each small step we take. God wants to be in relationship with us. God wants us to change our lives, to make a commitment with real depth and meaning.

**God’s speaks to us year around.** It just seems easier to hear God’s voice during Christmas and Easter. That’s when the presence of the Holy Spirit is most palpable. God speaks to us and our neighbors, locally and across the globe, whether we hear and understand or not. God’s voice calls to us in the middle of our busy, conflict-filled lives. We’re gathered today because we hear and respond. The very spirit within us thirsts to be with God. That’s what sustains us in the dark, hard times, building us up and drawing us to others who believe.

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<sup>3</sup> Gary Chapman, *Love is a Verb (devotional)*, except from *December 1<sup>st</sup>* by James Bell

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

**Paul's letter to the church in Rome tells us to welcome one another and rejoice.** Our God is a God of patience and encouragement. God's Spirit gives us hope so we can endure hardship and encourages us in good times and bad. God's unconditional love is always working on our behalf. God gave us Christmas to share good news with all of creation: Jesus Christ, the Savior, is born. There's a reason so many of us have memorized the words of John 3:16, "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won't perish but will have eternal life.*" That verse reminds us the gift wasn't just a baby, but the Son of God, given to save us from ourselves. That's good news!

**The message of Christmas is so powerful it helps us find ways to live in harmony, even during the darkest conflict, praising God with one voice.** There are stories of soldiers on opposite sides singing Christmas songs during a cease fire on Christmas Eve. The message of Christmas - God loves us, is so powerful, that death, depression and loneliness cannot stand against it. That's the power of holiness, God with us. If you remember nothing else, remember this truth: God is with us. Even when we've failed. In spite of our flaws. No matter whether we have hurt feelings. God loves you. Are you ready to receive God's gift? Turn to Jesus and make a little room for him in your heart.

**This year, I hope to make room for God and others in my heart.** The way to do that is to deny myself more often and to put them first. I have to work to make room in my heart and mind. The best way is to reach out and pour into others the love God gives me. That way, I'll have a little more room to celebrate on Christmas. I can find peace and praise God with joy, because of the wonderful gift we share. Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, is present in our hearts. Come, Lord Jesus!

Let us pray... *Lord, we stop. We turn. We wait for you. We've sinned. We've relied on our reputations or our accomplishments. Uncover what we've hidden, Lord. We've said we're sorry, but then we didn't change a thing. Help us truly repent, Lord. We want to bear good fruit, to be a church that longs for your coming, ready for you. Cleanse our hearts, Holy Spirit. Come, all you who love Jesus. Come, give thanks. Come, receive him. Come, get ready. Turn from sinful ways. Turn to God. And make peace with one another. In Jesus' name, Amen*

**Isaiah 11:1-10 (NRSV)**

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

**Romans 15:4-13 (NRSV)**

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

“Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name”; and again he says, “Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people”; and again, “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him”; and again Isaiah says, “The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.