

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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Advent I**

THE MEANING OF ADVENT

Mark 1:1-8

Know who the most powerful man in America is? Some people think it is not President Obama. It is Ben Bernanke, the chairman of the Federal Reserve. Before Bernanke it was Alan Greenspan. Before him the man who exerted more influence over monetary policy in the U.S. than anyone else was Arthur Burns. He was both a friend and advisor to several U.S. presidents.

Back in the 1970s, Burns began attending a Christian group that met each week at the White House for fellowship and prayer. He was welcomed warmly, but the other members of the group weren't quite sure how to relate to him, since Ben was Jewish. Every week, a different person would close the meeting in prayer. But they never asked Arthur Burns to do it, because they didn't want to make him uncomfortable. One week, however, the person leading the group was someone who didn't know Burns. At the end of the meeting, he turned to Burns and asked him to close in prayer. Several group members looked at each other anxiously, wondering what Arthur Burns would do.

Burns never flinched. He joined hands with the others in the circle, bowed his head and said: "Lord, I pray that you would bring Jews to know Jesus Christ. I pray that you would bring Muslims to know Jesus Christ. Finally, Lord, I pray that you would bring Christians to know Jesus Christ. Amen."

Can you say "Amen" to that? It is quite a prayer, isn't it?

It is always the right time to pray for Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, agnostics, atheists, and anyone else you can think of to come to know Jesus Christ. Even people like us who profess to be Christians. But it seems to me that Advent is an especially opportune time to come to know Christ in a fresh, dynamic, faith-infusing, life-changing way. To meet Him for the first time and experience His saving power. Or to get to know Him better. To go deeper and grow stronger in your relationship with Him.

Thanksgiving Day is now past – although you may be continuing to enjoy leftovers. Another Black Friday has come and gone. I'm glad you all survived it. Tomorrow is Cyber Monday, the unofficial start of the online holiday shopping season. Ready or not, it is just 27 days until Christmas. And today is the beginning of the season of the Christian year known as Advent. Advent begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continues until Christmas Day itself. The name Advent comes from the Latin word *advenire*, which means "coming" or "arrival." It refers, of course, to the birth of Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, in a stable in Bethlehem, at exactly the right time in history (Galatians 4:4), according to the plan of God.

Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time to prepare our hearts to celebrate the first coming of our Savior 2,000 years ago. It is also a time to focus on the future, to prepare our hearts for the promised coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever you are on the road of life, Advent is an opportune time to get right with God. Or to renew your love for God and your devotion to Him.

I think a brief look at the life and ministry of John the Baptist can give us some perspective on the purpose of Advent. Each of the four Gospels in the New Testament provides us with a picture of the person and ministry of John the Baptist as the “forerunner of the Messiah,” a prophet with a powerful presence and a penetrating message.

Mark begins his gospel – his *evangelion*, his evangel – the subject of which is the person and work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, by briefly describing the ministry of John the Baptist. As you probably know, John was the son – the only child – of a Jewish priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. John’s birth was foretold in Luke 1, by the angel Gabriel who appeared to Zechariah as he was carrying out his priestly duties in the temple in Jerusalem. Gabriel told Zechariah that the son to be born to him would “go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17).

John’s birth itself – fulfilling the promise of the angel – is recorded in Luke 1:57. The Gospel of John (written not by John the Baptist but by John the apostle) says that John the Baptist was “a man sent from God” (John 1:6). He was not the light of the world, and he knew it, but he came as a witness to the light, to show everyone where to find the light and who to believe in (John 1:7-8). He was not the incarnate Word of God. He was a witness to the Word. He did not come to attract attention to himself. He came to point people to the promised Messiah. He was a man on a mission from God. And his mission was to prepare the way for the advent, or coming, of the Savior.

The coming of John himself as the forerunner of the Messiah had been foretold by the prophet Malachi, who spoke of the messenger of the Lord who would prepare the way for Him (Malachi 3:1). His mission had been described by the prophet Isaiah, who spoke of the “voice crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord’” (Isaiah 40:3).

John’s message was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). Baptism itself was not a new idea in the Jewish culture. We talked in our study of the life and times of Simon Peter about the disagreement among the Jewish believers in the New Testament church over what Gentile (non-Jew) converts to the Christian faith had to do to be included in the church. What was well-established in the Jewish culture was that when Gentiles converted to the Jewish faith, three things had to take place:

1. Males had to undergo circumcision, which was the sign of the covenant between God and the people of Israel.
2. They had to offer animal sacrifices for their sins.

3. They had to be baptized as a sign of cleansing from the pollution of their old way of life.

So, Jews were accustomed to seeing Gentiles baptized. But here was John, calling on Jews to submit to what only a Gentile was supposed to need. The CW (conventional wisdom) was that you didn't need to undergo baptism if you were a Jew. But John was calling everyone – whether Jew or not – to be baptized as a sign of their sorrow and repentance of their sins. And the result of true repentance, John preached, would be the forgiveness of sins.

John understood who he was and why God had sent him. He knew it wasn't all about him. The purpose of his life was to point beyond himself to the promised Messiah, so that the people would recognize Jesus for who He was, believe in Him, and follow Him. He said: "I'm not the main attraction. The real action comes next. The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. His baptism – a holy baptism by the Holy Spirit – will change you from the inside out" (Mark 1:7-8, *The Message*).

There is an interesting exchange in John 1 between John the Baptist and a commission of priests and Levites who had come from Jerusalem to check him out. They wanted to know who he was. An honest question, although it may have had an edge to it. What they really may have been thinking was: "Who do you think you are, anyway?"

John didn't flinch at all when they came. He said: "I am not the Christ (Messiah)."

"Then, who? Elijah?"

"No."

"The prophet (foretold by Moses)?"

"No."

"Then, who are you? What do you have to say about yourself?"

In his answer, John applied the prophecy of Isaiah 40:3 to himself. He said: "I'm just a man doing what God has called me to do. I'm a voice crying in the wilderness: 'Get ready to meet the Lord, because He is coming.' I'm here to prepare the way for Him. If you think there is anything special about me, you haven't seen anything yet. The one who is coming after me – the promised Messiah, the long-awaited Savior – is so great I am not worthy even to be His slave" (John 1:19-27).

One day John saw Jesus nearby, and he said: "Look, there He is, the Lamb of God – God's Passover Lamb – who takes away the sin of the world. This is the one I've been telling you about" (John 1:29-30). The very next day, John was with two of his disciples when he saw Jesus again. Again he said: "There He is, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples who were with John left, and took off after Jesus. They spent the rest of the day with Jesus. One of the

two was Andrew. You know what Andrew did next. The first thing he did after meeting Jesus and spending time with Him was to go and get his brother, Simon Peter, in order to bring him to meet Jesus (John 1:35-42).

Andrew and the other disciple weren't the only ones who left John and began following Jesus. The crowds John had been attracting began to follow Jesus instead. How do you think John felt about the fact that his popularity was waning and his audience shrinking? Angry? Jealous? Disappointed? None of the above. When somebody brought it up to him, he said: "I told you from the beginning that I am not the Messiah. I am simply the one sent ahead of Him to get things ready. The bride belongs to the bridegroom, not the 'best man.' This is the time ordained for Him to move onto center stage, while I slip into the shadows. He must become greater. I must become less" (John 3:26-30).

Now, some of you may ask: "Pastor, why are you taking all this time to talk about John the Baptist? The message of the gospel is not about him, it's about Jesus. Christmas is not about the coming of John the Baptist, it's about the birth of Jesus." You're right, of course. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. And the main thing in Christmas is Jesus. The main thing in the gospel is Jesus. The main thing in life is to trust in Jesus, to know Him, to love Him, to follow Him and to serve Him as long as you live.

But the life and ministry of John the Baptist can help us to prepare for the celebration of the birth of Christ *and* to prepare for His coming again. John's mission was to prepare people for the first Advent, the first coming of the Savior of the world. From our vantage point, we do not wait in anticipation of the Messiah's first Advent. It has already happened. From our place in history, we look back to His first coming to give His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins with hearts full of joy and gladness and gratitude to God for His grace. As John Newton said to William Wilberforce near the end of his life: "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior." With gratitude in our hearts to God, we celebrate His Christmas gift to us – the gift of His Son, our Savior – recognizing that we, too, are great sinners who need a Savior.

But there is a kind of double exposure to the season of Advent. In Advent we look back in celebration. And we look forward in anticipation. We focus on the past *and* the future. We remember what has already taken place. And we wait for what is yet to be in the unfolding plan of God. With songs of thanksgiving and sacrifices of praise we remember the first coming of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – including yours and mine. And we also look forward in faith to His promised coming again, which will be the second Advent. So we can say that the season of Advent is a yearly reminder that the same Jesus who was born in a stable in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago *is* coming again.

Why do we believe that? Because the Bible says so. The promised return of Christ is mentioned more than 300 times in the New Testament. Jesus Himself spoke often of His coming again. For example, when He was in the upper room with His disciples on the night before He went to the cross, Jesus said to them: "I am going there (to heaven) to prepare a place for you. And ... I will come back and take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also" (John 14:2-3).

Jesus' favorite way of referring to Himself was the title "Son of Man." In Luke 21:27, He said: "They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory."

When it happens, Jesus said, everyone will know it. He said: "As lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man" (Matthew 24:27).

In Acts 1, just after Jesus ascended into heaven, two angels appeared to the disciples of Jesus and said: "Men of Galilee, why are you standing here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:9-11).

The promise of Christ's return permeates the letters of Paul as well. In Philippians 3 he writes: "Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they may be like His glorious body" (Philippians 3:20-21). Won't that be a great day?

In his letter to Titus, Paul says that "we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good" (Titus 2:13-14). As we fight the spiritual battles of this life, as we daily experience the effects of living in a sin-polluted world, the promise of His coming again is our "blessed hope."

Both the first and second comings of Christ are in view in Hebrews 9. First it says in verse 26 that Christ "appeared once for all... to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself." That was His first Advent. Then it says in verse 28: "And He will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him."

Jesus will come again. His coming will be visible. His first coming was under the radar. Hardly anybody, except for a few shepherds, paid attention to the news of the birth of a baby boy in Bethlehem. Not so with His second coming. Every eye will see Him, it says in Revelation 1:7. His coming will light up the sky like nothing you've ever seen.

Advent is a time to get ready. Not just to give and receive gifts or to carry out your particular Christmas traditions. It is a time to prepare your heart to celebrate the coming of the Christ of Christmas. May I encourage you to be intentional about putting Christ at the center of your Advent and Christmas celebrations, and keeping Christ at the center? If there is a silver lining to our lingering economic malaise, it is that it may encourage us to look beyond the materialism of our American way of "doing Christmas" to focus instead on the transcendent gift of God's love to us in the person of His very own Son.

Advent is also a time to prepare our hearts for the second Advent. The Bible is insistent that Jesus will come again. It is equally insistent that no one know when it will be. The important thing is to be ready when He comes.

None of us knows how much time we have either before Jesus returns or God calls us home in death. Remember *The Bucket List*, the movie about two guys (played by Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson) who, when diagnosed with cancer, make a list of all the things they want to do before they “kick the bucket”? The movie was inspired by a book entitled *100 Things to Do Before You Die*. Did you know that one of the authors of the book, Dave Freeman, died at the age of 47 from a head injury sustained in a fall? He had done only about half of the things on his list before he died, which is a sobering reminder that we don’t know how much time we will have to accomplish all the things we hope to do.

You don’t know how much time God will give you. No one does. Advent is an opportune time to get ready, to make sure you’re ready, to meet the Lord.

How to do that?

The primary thing is to take to heart the clarion call of John the Baptist and repent of all known sin in your life. I’m still learning in my own life how deep-seated and stubborn sin can be. Someone said that too many of us try to manage our sin rather than repenting of our sin. Dear friends, don’t try to manage your sin. Don’t try to just keep your sin under control. Don’t excuse yourself because everybody else seems to be doing it. John Wesley, the 18th century English theologian and evangelist, and founder of the Methodist movement, said: “As a very little dust will disorder a clock, and the least sand (in our eyes) will obscure our sight, so the least grain of sin which is upon the heart will hinder its right motion toward God.”

Whatever your sin may be, repent of it. Renounce it. Denounce it. Confess it. Turn from it. In the Old Testament, the word for repent is the word *shub*, which means “to turn.” It is a call to turn from idols to God, to turn from doing evil to obey God. The primary New Testament word for repentance is *metanoia*, which means a “change of mind.” *Metanoia* has to do with a change of mind, a change of heart, a change of attitude, a decision of your will that changes your behavior or the direction of your life.

Make sure your heart is right with God. If you’re not sure whether you’re right with God and you’d like to be sure, or if you’d like to know how to get right with God, I invite you to come up to the front of the sanctuary during the closing hymn or after the benediction, and one of the elders will be happy to talk and pray with you.

Did you know that when a sinner repents, the angels throw a party in heaven? It is true! That is what Jesus says in Luke 15. He says there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (15:10). Over every sinner who repents.

There is an old story about a young woman who was expelled from heaven and told that she would be readmitted only if she brought back the one gift God valued the most. She brought back drops of blood from a dying patriot. But that was not it. She collected coins given by a destitute widow for the poor. She brought back a remnant of a Bible used by a famous preacher. She brought back dust from the shoes of missionaries who had served many years

in a distant land. She brought back all these things and more, but each time she was turned away.

One day, while she was watching a small boy playing near a fountain, a man rode up on horseback and dismounted to take a drink. Seeing the boy, the man thought back to the innocence of his childhood. But as he looked into the water at the fountain and saw a reflection of his hardened face, he was overcome with sorrow for the sin in his life. In that moment he wept tears of repentance. The young woman took one of those tears back to heaven, where she was welcomed with open arms.

The story is fiction, of course. But its message is worth remembering. God cherishes our tears of repentance when they come from a truly penitent heart.

Advent is a time for each of us to examine our lives and, as God reveals our sin to us, to repent and put our trust in the finished work of Jesus Christ, our all-sufficient Savior. Rejoice in His first Advent 2,000 years ago. And make your heart ready at every moment for His second Advent.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. And let everyone – Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, agnostics, atheists, New Agers, whatever, even Christians, too – come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.