

Scripture Passages

Isaiah 9:6-7

⁶ 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.
⁷ Of the greatness of his government and peace
there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the LORD Almighty
will accomplish this.

Isaiah 12

Songs of Praise

¹ In that day you will say:

"I will praise you, LORD.
Although you were angry with me,
your anger has turned away
and you have comforted me.

² Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust and not be afraid.
The LORD, the LORD himself, is my strength and
my defense^[a];
he has become my salvation."

³ With joy you will draw water
from the wells of salvation.

⁴ In that day you will say:

"Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name;
make known among the nations what he has
done,

and proclaim that his name is exalted.
⁵ Sing to the LORD, for he has done glorious
things;

let this be known to all the world.
⁶ Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion,
for great is the Holy One of Israel among you."

Sermon

I think the best season of the year is Advent. When I was a child, the anticipation of Christmas was overwhelming. Starting at the beginning of December, our house would transform into a beautifully decorated place, white lights would illuminate the front porch and landscaping, and a live tree with crystal and glass ornaments became the centerpiece of the house.

When we were children, Randy and I always had real Advent calendars from Germany filled with chocolates, and even little toys once, to help count down the days. Here at church, my family would help decorate the sanctuary and tree with ornaments during Hanging of the Greens, go caroling to our shut-ins, and participated in lighting the Advent candles. And, I

remember one year in Education Hour, we helped make the banners that are used today. As a child, Advent was a magical time.

As I grew older, the calendars dwindled, but I still loved the season. I began to appreciate the month marked by a spirit of expectation, of anticipation, of preparation, and of longing. I found comfort in the hope that God would give us a King to rule with truth, justice and righteousness over His people and His creation. I rejoiced in the ceremonial lighting the candles of joy, peace, love and hope. I was amazed by walking into the sanctuary and seeing this Christmas tree beautifully decorated in white and gold, and the purple color of royalty reflected in the paraments. I guess you could say, I had turned into an “Adventophile,” or a lover of Advent.

But, over the past few years I noticed a change. This year in particular, the seasons easily blended together. Summertime turned into campaign time, and we spent months, and months, *and months* inundated with political ads telling us who to vote for, and more importantly, who **not** to vote for. Then, overnight, all of those campaign slogans abruptly changed into door-buster specials and luxury car commercials with large red bows and, without realizing it, we were thrust into the Christmas season. We all know that in our secular celebration of Christmas, the Christmas season, excuse me, the more politically correct, *holiday* season, begins weeks prior to Christmas Day, and usually doesn't even last until the new year.

Like the last few years, I entered the month of December excited and ready, anticipating Advent. But, by the time mid-December came around, the *holiday* season had worn me down. I was exhausted and ready for the year to end – I was dreading having to work my retail job, and its busiest week of the year. Because Christmas fell on a Saturday this year, that meant an entire week of last minute shoppers and lots of “*Happy Holidays*” before the season was to be over.

I had forgotten what the season of Advent is about.

To overcome this lackluster excitement and “I can't wait until it is over” attitude, I decided to take some time to revisit what I loved so much about the Advent season. I opened my Bible, hit the blogosphere, and loaded up an iTunes playlist of the Christmas classics. Words like: *Light and life to all He brings, Born to raise the sons of earth, Born to give them second birth*” and “*A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices, for yonder breaks a new and glorious morn*” sang through my computer speakers as I read words from Isaiah and Luke, and various theological bloggers mixed in.

I noticed that in the time I spent reading and listening, the stress of the season began to melt. I still had a lot to do over the next few weeks, but things just seemed better. By devoting time to remembering what Advent is all about, I was enriching my celebration of Christmas. And, by taking the last few weeks to focus on the hope of Jesus' coming, I was much more joyful when I finally got to celebrate it. The more I got in touch with my need for a Savior, the more I rejoiced at the Savior's birth.

I also rediscovered that Advent is a solution to the age-old problem of secular Christmas vs. spiritual Christmas. We know that Christmas is, most of all, a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, yet given the secular traditions of Christmas today, we spend most of our time preparing, not for a celebration of the birth, but for fulfilling the demands of the season. We have presents to buy and gifts to give. We have parties to attend, and parties to host. We have family who come to visit or, we are the relatives who go elsewhere to celebrate. If we have younger children, we may very well spend hours assembling gifts that, often, come with complicated instructions. And so on, and so on, and so on. With Advent, we can keep our sanity as we juggle the added activities of the season.

But, most importantly, during my reflection, I realized that the principles of Advent are not just something we can practice in December. During Advent, we prepare and anticipate the coming of Jesus. This season is to remember the birth of Jesus, as well as to anticipate His second coming. We're reminded of how much we need a Savior, and we look forward to Jesus' second coming, even as we prepare to celebrate his birth at Christmas.

We seem to be experts in preparing for Jesus' birth. Through the traditions we hold here in this congregation and the others we participate in with our families, we have mastered the preparations for the Christmas season. But once the presents are opened, the tree comes down and we transition into the New Year, how much do we continue preparing ourselves? How much do we prepare our hearts for worship each Sunday morning? How much time do we spend in preparation for communion? Do we spend time in prayer or devotion before walking through those glass doors into the Narthex?

A friend I met this summer in Peru introduced me to an international Bible study, called Bible Study Fellowship. The BSF organization, which began more than 50 years ago, meets a desire for people wishing to deepen their faith through a weekly Bible study.

While she was talking about joining the Lima class, I decided to look into the various classes held here in Michigan. So, in September, despite being a couple thousand miles apart, we both began a study of the book of Isaiah.

I mention this because today's Scripture text is what got me thinking about preparation, and not just preparation during Advent. The first half of the book begins with the prophet Isaiah carrying out a message of judgment to Judah, Israel, and the surrounding nations, while mentioning the promise of a remnant. Chapter upon chapter, Isaiah uses vivid imagery of how God's chosen people have turned away, what will become of them, and who is coming to save them.

But, in the midst of Isaiah's poetic illustrations and prophecy of the coming Messiah, he takes a moment to praise the Living God in chapter 12. Isaiah writes:

"In that day you will say, I will praise you oh Lord, surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord, is my strength and my song, he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.

In that day you will say, Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name. Make known among the nations what he has done, and proclaim that His name is exalted. Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things, let this be known to all the world. Shout aloud and sing for joy, people of Zion, for great is the Holy One of Israel.”

When I was read those words, after pages and pages of judgment, I couldn't help but read them again and again. When my BSF small group met to discuss the chapters we had read in the previous week, I could not help myself from bringing up this particular passage. It seemed fitting for Isaiah to close a series of prophecies, some great and others not so great, with this doxology of praise.

That night, we spent a majority of our time discussing this passage and what it means for us today. And then, a member of our group, who happens to be an English teacher, mentioned that that the word “you” is singular in the first verse but transitions to the plural “you” for the remaining verses of praise. Thus, the first hymn is an individual praising God for salvation, which is followed by the corporate worship of those individuals all proclaiming the great acts of God.

This subtle change in subject from the singular to collective “you,” which might not be as noticeable in the English language, brought our conversation to the topic of preparation and how vibrant worship might be in our own congregations, if each individual praised God prior to coming together to worship collectively.

I went home that night thinking about what **I** should be doing before coming to worship on Sunday mornings. Shortly after that discussion, we entered the season of Advent and began the preparations for the birth. And, I noticed a change here. Maybe it was the joyfulness of the season running over into worship, but I think it was our preparations, expectation and hope that made worship more vibrant, energetic and uplifting.

So, as we wrap up this month of preparations and expectation, I want to leave this season taking the principles of preparation we so diligently practice during Advent and employing them in my daily life. By seeking God through prayer and meditation before I walk through those doors, I can contribute to an energetic worship, as we worship Him here, together as a family of faith.

So may you remember that the focus of Advent is to prepare our hearts for the coming of Christ, and to take the time to truly prepare yourself, not only for work and pleasure, but also for worship with joy, in spirit and in truth. The prayers of humble devotion, commitment, and submission, prayers for deliverance, and prayers from those walking in darkness who are awaiting and anticipating a great light, are not just the prayers we say during Advent, but rather things we can pray for all year long.

Amen.