

“The Meaning of The Flames: Hope”

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1st Sunday of Advent

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First Scripture Lesson: Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Second Scripture Lesson: Isaiah 2:1-5

¹The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. ²In days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many peoples shall come and say, “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore. ⁵O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!



Sermon: *The Meaning of The Flames: Hope*

Today is the first day of the season of Advent. Yes, I know, since the day after Halloween, stores have been putting up decorations and blasting Christmas music over the loudspeakers, but in spite of what almost everything in this culture says, it’s not quite Christmas yet. It’s only Advent. But most people don’t understand the difference between the two. I’ll give you an example.

One of the great traditions that appear around this time of year is the Advent Calendar. They come in all shapes and sizes but all essentially help us mark the time until Christmas Day. Some just have little doors or windows and you open one each day and when they are all open, it’s Christmas! But some have little surprises behind those doors. Godiva, and Hershey’s sell advent calendars with a different chocolate treat for each day. Several companies make Beauty Advent Calendars and when you open the little doors you find a different item of make-up. A Company called “Man-Gifty” is marketing what they call a “Man-Vent Calendar. Every day features a different “manly” treat like alligator jerky, bacon-flavored coffee, and tabasco jellybeans.¹ And of course, there are toy-themed advent calendars, too. Barbie and Hot Wheels and Lego all offer the chance to experience a little bit of gift excitement in the days and weeks before Christmas.

But as creative and fun as they are, these are not really “Advent” Calendars. In researching this topic, I found a piece from the Today Show in which they reviewed what they referred to as “The 46 Best Advent Calendars of 2019.”² Included in their list were several “Hanukah” calendars. Now I feel this is a good place to stop and point out that Hanukah and Advent are two very different things. Hanukah, and I’m surprised I actually have to say this, is a Jewish holiday. And the dates of Hanukah are in no way tied to the dates of Advent or Christmas. In fact, this year Adam Sandler will invite us all to “put on your yarmulke, it’s time to celebrate Hanukkah,” just as Advent is coming to an end.

Today also included on their list of best “Advent” calendars several that go for only 12 days. The most egregious offender in this regard was the “Target 12 Days of Beauty Advent Calendar.”³ You will hopefully remember that Advent is a time-period that begins four Sundays before Christmas and ends on Christmas Eve. The number of days in Advent varies from year to year but it is always significantly more than 12. What *does* last 12 days is the season of Christmas which begins on Christmas Day and ends on January 5th, the day before Epiphany. You might have 12 days of Christmas, but no, Target, you will never, ever, ever have 12 days of Advent.

I really noticed this difference between how the secular world uses the word “Advent” and what Advent really is, a couple of years ago when Will Grey got his first Lego Advent Calendar from his grandmother. On the first day of Advent we opened door number one to discover the little Lego surprise that was waiting inside. And each day we repeated the same ritual. First thing in the morning, Will Grey would open the little door for that day and put together whatever he found inside.

As we drew closer to Christmas day, the anticipation of each morning grew and grew. But then on December 22, we noticed that the door we were opening was the last one. There were no more little doors to open; no more surprises to discover. What happened? It's not Christmas yet! Advent isn't over yet! And then it hit me. We had begun our Lego Advent celebration on the actual first day of Advent, and Advent always begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas. That year, the first Sunday of Advent was on November 29. But Lego Advent calendars and in fact, almost all of the commercially available secular advent calendars begin on December 1, regardless of when Advent actually begins. They don't count down the days of Advent so much as they count down the days of December.

You see, people, especially the people who make Advent Calendars, don't really understand what Advent is. Some people think Advent is just the time before Christmas. It's a Christmas "pre-season; a sort spring training period to get ready for Christmas day. Some people don't even realize Advent exists. For them, the calendar flips from Thanksgiving Day to a month-long Christmas season. The church I grew up in didn't really observe advent. For a significant portion of our neighbors, Advent is just that time before Christmas when you shop and go to parties and put up a tree.

But Advent is actually a season of the year that has its own significance and its own meaning. It is the season of preparation that leads to Christmas, but it is not specifically a season of preparation *for* Christmas. Advent is a time of waiting, and hope. It is a time during which we remember and honor those who, in days past, waited hopefully and expectantly for the coming of God's promised Messiah. Even as today we wait hopefully and expectantly for his promised return.

The Israelites, descendants of Abraham, God's chosen people, had been promised a land and a heritage. But over the course of history they had repeatedly turned from what God intended them to do and be and so eventually they lost that which they had been given. They were defeated in wars, came under the domination of foreign powers, were forced to pay tribute to rival kings. They warred between themselves until they split into two separate kingdoms, and eventually Israel was defeated and wiped from the map as a sovereign state. The Israelites were carried away from the land God had given them and taken into exile in a foreign land. During the time of their downfall and exile, and in the long years after their return from exile; in the years when they were subject to first one foreign power then another, the people heard and remembered the words God spoke through the prophets: that God's great love for God's people had not diminished and that eventually, God would send a Messiah, a descendant of David to be unto the people of God a savior and King and his rule would be forever and he would establish God's justice in the world and be a blessing unto all peoples.

For this the people waited and for this the people hoped. That promise was fulfilled in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ. Yet he was a different kind of Messiah than what the people had been expecting. In his life, death, and resurrection, he revealed most fully who God is and what God does. In Christ we see fully manifest, the grace, and mercy, and steadfast love of God. Jesus did not restore Israel to prominence among the nations. Instead, he announced the very real presence of God's Kingdom in all the Earth, for all people. This is not a Kingdom of political influence and military power. It is a Kingdom of peace and justice, where God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

And while evil still maintains a foothold, we see the inbreaking of God's Kingdom all around us. Wherever justice is done, wherever the poor have enough, wherever the strong take up the cause of the weak, wherever violence ceases, wherever the disadvantaged are treated with equity, wherever prejudice and hatred and inequality are defeated, wherever kindness and goodness win the day, there is the Kingdom of God.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Christ, our savior, our Messiah, the one through whom humanity has been reconciled to God and to one another. But during Advent we remember that the Kingdom he began is not yet completed. And so, we honor those who waited and hoped, even as we ourselves await and hope for the completion of the Kingdom he began. It is this hope that still gives life to the Christian church today; the knowledge of God's goodness and faithfulness, and the hope that God will fulfill God's promise, made before time; a promise made manifest in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ; a promise for the coming of God's Kingdom that is here among us and which is not yet come to completion.

Ours is a culture that loves Christmas. And with Thanksgiving now behind us and the calendar turning to December, that culture invites us to look forward 25 days; to anticipate the coming of a single day, characterized by presents and goodies and warm jammies and "*A Christmas Story*"⁴ showing on an endless loop on the TV. The culture in which we live encourages us to await with eager anticipation that *single day* of joyous revelry.

But in our Christian tradition, we are invited to look further than that; to hope for something more profound than that. In this season of Advent, we look forward in anticipation of the day when God's Kingdom comes to completion; when as the prophet Isaiah writes: "[The Lord] shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." It is a vision of a future molded by God, a future in which God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. It is the anticipation of Christ's return, informed by the memory of his coming. It is the confidence in God's promise, born of the knowledge of God's faithfulness. It is a time of waiting and of Hope.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ "ManVent - The Original Advent Calendar for Men." ManGifty, 2 Dec. 2019, www.mangifty.com/products/advent-calendar-for-men.

² Loffredi, Julie, et al. "46 best Christmas Advent calendars 2019." TODAY.com, 20 Nov. 2019, www.today.com/home/best-advent-calendars-countdown-christmas-2017-t118294.

³ "Target Beauty Box™ - Advent Calendar." 2 Dec. 2019, www.target.com/p/target-beauty-box-8482-advent-calendar/-/A-77061790?clkid=2abdeb7dN152e11ea9bec42010a246c11&lnm=81938&afid=Skimbit%20Ltd.&ref=tgt_adv_xasd0002.

⁴ Shepherd, Jean. *A Christmas Story*. Performance by Peter Billingsley, et al., MGM/UA Entertainment Co., 1983.