

Happy Advent! It feels to me like we're dashing towards Christmas faster than you can say "I'll have a peppermint-spiced eggnog gingerbread latte, please!"

When you look around town at the festive lights and commercial activity that started the day after Thanksgiving, I wonder, is it too soon for Christmas?

Yes it is! Because it's Advent!!! Advent isn't meant to feel rushed or frenetic – but that's the reality of our worldly context pressuring us to buy and to plan and to decorate. *Who else feels like they need a bit more time and a bit less stress?*

Advent is meant to be a season during which we take time to stand back from the frenzy and pay **attention** – to **wonder** – and to **hope** – for God to come to deliver God's people.

It's a real blessing to belong to a church where Advent is observed. When we gather here on the 4 Sundays of Advent, we get that chance to step outside of the snowballing rush towards the Big Day.

We're set on a point in the future: yes, Christmas Day, remembering and celebrating the Incarnation of God in Jesus the Christ in his First Advent, but also anticipating the return of Christ in his Second Advent. Both of these events are foretold in the Scriptures in several places. Focusing on today's readings, Jeremiah prophesies of "a righteous Branch to spring up for David"

who shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. And the name by which that Branch will be called: “The Lord is our righteousness.”

Through the prophet Jeremiah, God’s judgment was spoken against Israel, as the people strayed from trusting in God and instead looked to the idols of other nations - but they were also given the promise of a righteous Branch (who is Jesus) who would bring restoration. That righteous branch is Jesus, the Messiah they were waiting for. It’s through Jesus that we are made righteous: ‘The Lord is our righteousness’.

But what does **righteousness** mean, and how is the **Lord** our righteousness?

Righteousness is two things: first, the Hebrew concept of righteousness is about the fidelity or faithfulness of God to God’s covenant with humanity. So it’s about God keeping God’s promises. Secondly, from the early centuries of Christianity, righteousness has been thought of as a moral or ethical quality enabling a person to stand before a holy God. In the New Testament we learn that we are justified before God by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. This is what’s known as ‘imputed righteousness’ – the state of righteousness before God is the result of God’s activity through Jesus – it’s not of our own doing – it’s by grace, through faith.

Our Psalm for today expresses a plea in verse 6 that many of us can relate to: “Remember not the sins of my youth and my transgressions; remember me according to your love and for the sake of your goodness, O Lord.”

It's a prayer of great trust: "To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; my God, I put my trust in you."

Because of the faith handed down through generations to us, we can trust that our sins and transgressions **have** been covered and removed by the righteousness of Jesus Christ, according to the love of God and for the sake of God's goodness. And that is what the First Advent, the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, is all about.

In Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, Paul prays for the church that God would 'strengthen your hearts in holiness so that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.' This 'strengthening' of our hearts is about trust - Keeping faith - Holding fast to the promises made by God that he is with us and will guide us and protect us, come what may.

But what about the Second Advent – why should we look forward to that, especially when we read scary gospel passages like today's: "People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken." How can we dare say, "Happy Advent"?

Jesus urges us not to worry or be afraid but to "stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." Again it's a message to keep the faith. And that's not always an easy thing to do. Waiting for news of a possible job offer. Waiting for an operation. Waiting for some relief from suffering. Waiting for reconciliation between people. It can be really

hard to wait for something to happen. We long for deliverance, just as the Israelites did. We long for relief from injustice and evil in the world. We struggle to find signs of hope. But that hope, however faint it might be at times, lies within us— the hope that God will come and set the world right. And that ‘deliverance’ will require a shaking up of the heavens and the earth – the birth pangs... all creation groans for its redemption as we witness the evil that seemingly dominates our world. But we and all the saints who have gone before us are safe in the light of Christ.

Advent is a time of preparation as we hold together these themes of darkness and light. It’s a time of prayer for awareness and for gratitude for our promised deliverance. Many churches including ourselves have adopted blue as the color for Advent. Blue represents hope, expectation and heaven. It’s also the color traditionally associated with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in art and iconography. Mary who bore God’s gift to the world – the Christ Child.

From today we enter into a season of waiting, expecting, and longing; as we watch for Christ, the promised light of the world. As we brave the shopping malls, buying gifts for loved ones, and collapse exhausted in our favorite coffee house with a soothing holiday-spiced drink, may our hearts not be weighed down. Our redemption is drawing near. God’s got this. Amen.