

Advent 2018: Rejoice, Part 1

Sunday, December 2, 2018

Philippians 4:4

We are exceedingly glad that you are with us today today, which in the church tradition is the beginning of the Advent season, the 4th Sunday before Christmas. Our theme this year for Advent is REJOICE! And we will talk more about that in just a moment.

Let me highlight a couple of special events that mark this season for us - **First**, the Sunday before Christmas we traditionally have a BIG breakfast together to celebrate our final Sunday of Advent. This year that date is **Dec 23rd**. If possible, we ask everyone to bring a breakfast item to share, arrive a few minutes before 10 for set up. So hope you can be here for that celebration. And **secondly**, we mark the end of the Advent season here with - what this year will be our **8th annual Candlelight Christmas Eve service - 9pm on Dec 24th**. We do this one a little late to allow everyone who has family events that day to hopefully have time to get back. Our purpose is to wrap up Advent, right before bed, with a gathering of the church to celebrate Jesus Christ. Many of our younger kids come in their pj's which is perfectly ok - and we are done just prior to 10pm. So I really hope you can join us for that and bring a friend.

So - What is ADVENT? The word ADVENT comes from the Latin word *Adventus* meaning arrival or coming into place. Even though many equate ADVENT **only** with a celebration of the birth of Jesus - In the church tradition, ADVENT has always carried a dual focus. The word for ADVENT in the original Greek of the NT - is **Parousia** (pair - oh - see - ah) which means the *arrival or the presence*. In Church tradition (specifically early church fathers) the word Parousia was used to refer to the coming of God's son Jesus Christ in human flesh (the Incarnation - the First ADVENT) which we celebrate at Christmas; **as well as** the second arrival of Christ still to come (the second ADVENT), when he returns for His church and to judge all the world. The church therefore - those of us who are believers - live **between** these two events, the first and second ADVENT or **Parousia**.

So the season of ADVENT is traditionally a time period the church has set aside to focus attention to both. (*So brief History alert - it won't last long, do not panic*). The earliest written evidence of the church celebrating a time of Advent dates back to around 380AD (approx 350 years after the resurrection of Christ). By the 400's and 500's, the church had begun to fix the date to celebrate the birth of Christ on Dec 25th, and ADVENT became a widespread fixture of the Christmas season. In the early days of ADVENT, the church would spend a portion of the season contemplating the reality of Jesus return to the earth, confessing sin, considering the

state of their hearts; and praying for his quick return. They would then transition their focus onto the first Parousia of Jesus, the Messiah born in a manger; the savior of the world. Some in the church would even FAST during the weeks leading up to Christmas, and then FEAST during the 12 days following Christmas. So traditionally ADVENT is a way for the church to consider our place in God's unfolding story and what it practically means for us that we live between these two realities - the already completed advent of Jesus **and the anticipated** ADVENT yet to come. So we aim in this season to focus on more than just the event of the birth of Christ, and by doing so we are joining with many years of church practice; dating back some 1,600 years. In the western church, there are many different traditions that have developed surrounding the time of ADVENT; and if you grew up participating in this - then perhaps your family had certain things that they did; or perhaps you would like to begin those traditions in your home now. Some of the most common are what you witnessed this morning and what we will be doing as we gather on Sundays together: A lighting of a candle (signifying Jesus as the light of the world covered in darkness), scripture reading and reflection, and the singing of Christ honoring songs.

I will say this, there is no command in the bible to celebrate an ADVENT season; there is no command to celebrate Christmas. There are many Christians throughout the world who, out of the convictions in their heart, abstain from certain elements of this season. There are other Christians who choose to go all in so to speak, and they participate in cultural traditions as well - Christmas trees, decorations, and presents. The Bible addresses this in Romans 14:5-6, **5 One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6 The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God.** The Bible doesn't tell us whether or not to celebrate Christmas Day; the Bible says this - if you participate, do so out of your conviction to honor the Lord. If you abstain, do so out of your conviction to honor the Lord. Whatever you do or do not do - let it be for the glory of God.

So we have freedom. But the reason we choose at Agape to celebrate a season of ADVENT, is because I believe that the bible absolutely calls us to anticipate the Parousia (the coming) of Christ; and I believe the spiritual disciplines that we engage in for ADVENT, the pondering and reflecting on the person of Christ, and the investigation into the state of our hearts before Him, **should be a lifestyle for the Christian.** And doing something for 3 to 4 weeks can assist us in setting good habits continually.

With that in mind, we want to encourage the church to participate in aspects of these spiritual disciplines during this ADVENT season not just on Sundays; but daily, in your homes. We have produced an Advent guide for this year's celebration. And I am going to see if a couple of

people can come and help me with these? I would like for one member of your family to raise your hands, and we want to give one of these to your home (so just one).

I also have a PDF form of this if you are someone who would like to have this for your phone or tablet, I sent that out this morning to the church in email. So if you are on our email list you received it.

So let's walk through this quickly, each day beginning today through December 24th there are scripture readings from both the old and new testament; each day also has some questions related to the passages to be used for reflection and discussion. Our encouragement is for you, and if you are married your family, to take time each day over the course of the next 22 days to read these passages and reflect on them. If you have some ADVENT traditions you could incorporate these readings into that time; or if you want to start some ADVENT traditions there are some suggestions in this guide for personal and family worship; I would really encourage families to do this together and if you have children let them participate with the lighting of a candle, the reading of the passage, and even the singing of songs. By focusing on the same scriptures and reflection questions, all of us as families can worship individually while simultaneously participating with the entire congregation for edification and growth.

The ADVENT guide this year is broken into approximately 3 weeks, each week having a different focus. **Today through next week** the readings are focused on Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, how Jesus fulfilled those prophecies, and how they apply to us today. **The second week**, the readings and questions are focused on the events surrounding the birth of Christ. And the **3rd and final week** is focused on our theme for this year - readings related to the biblical call to REJOICE and how the Bible teaches us to fight for happiness in God. And that idea is where we will spend our time on Sundays during this month, including the rest of today.

A few months ago I was on vacation with my family and this passage jumped out at me, and struck me as significant for us as a church: **Philippians 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: REJOICE!** And as I pondered this for several days, I felt that the LORD wanted us to spend some time focused on the scriptural call for Christian Joy.

I don't want this to be an abstract idea. What specifically does JOY mean? How does the Bible describe it? Well when we search scripture, we find that the Bible pairs the word JOY with other words such as PLEASURE (Ps 16:11), THANKFULNESS (Ps 107:22), LAUGHTER (Ps 126:2), CHEERFULNESS (Ecc 9:7), and DELIGHT (Jeremiah 15:16). But over 24 times in the bible joy is paired with the word GLADNESS (Deuteronomy 28:47, 2 Chronicles 7:10, Esther 5:9, Ps 21:6, Is 65:18).

Joy is a command of the Lord. God actually commands His people to be joyful, cheerful, and glad. That was the sense in the Old Testament, when God's people were told that **because they did not serve Him with joyfulness, they would end up serving their enemies** (Deuteronomy 28:47-48). And it is also the sense in Philippians 4 and other passages we will look at in the NT, where the command is repeated twice: REJOICE! As **Charles Spurgeon** said, **"The word Rejoice is not only joy once, but it is joy over and over again. REJOICE!"** And I hope you find it an exceedingly pleasant truth that God desires so much for you to be joyful that He commands it of you. What God produced by the mind of man, is like our God - the true God, who makes our Gladness in Him a requirement? What religion in the world besides Christianity teaches that their deity makes it a responsibility to live in Delight and Cheerfulness? Our God **delights in our welfare** (Ps 35:27), and it is in our welfare to be people that ALWAYS REJOICE. This is not a burdensome command, but it is a serious one. Joy is not optional for those who are in Christ. The Christian life is one that should be characterized NOT by a pretend, shallow cheerfulness that ignores tough realities; This is not about putting on a smile and just pretending like things are ok all the time. What this is about is our life in Christ as a display of delight, pleasure, cheerfulness, and gladness in God - a state of being that enhances our best days and carries us through our worst. Christians should be known for our JOY. We should be characterized by action that joy produces such as thanksgiving and praise and contentment; and we should repent of that which is not from JOY such as: resentment, criticality, complaining, and hopelessness. Church, this is good news. God delights in your delight in Him. It is pleasing to God for you to be GLAD in Him.

Now, If you do not feel particularly joyful, the message today is not intended for you to walk away feeling burdened or condemned. Joy is commanded. And so the reality is that you and I should strive for it and fight for it. God wants you to have JOY; continually. Which is why He commanded you to REJOICE ALWAYS. But he wants you to have JOY IN HIM. That is why the command in **Philippians 4:4** reads as it does: **Rejoice IN THE LORD Always**. And that is the key portion of this verse for us. It is only in and through Jesus Christ that we can have JOY that is true, and joy that is pleasing to God. In Jesus, a lifestyle marked by JOY is absolutely possible. And that is why the focus of our ADVENT season is going to be REJOICE.

I want to give you 3 life truths that I hope will explain the connection that I see between our JOY and the **Parousia of Jesus**; and this will be for us a foundation that we can build on the next 3 weeks.

LifeTruth #1: If we believe something will increase our joy, then we will greatly anticipate its arrival. So let me give some examples of what I mean. Why do we anticipate the arrival of the weekend? Or of a new show or a season of a show on Netflix? What MARVEL fan is not

anticipating the release of Avengers 4? Why do we anticipate these things? Because we absolutely believe that they will increase our joy. It might be that we are anticipating a career move, or a salary increase, or the new release of a phone or a tablet. We anticipate because we believe things things will increase gladness. It might be a relationship, or an increase in pay, or a new home or neighborhood - because we are convinced the ADVENT if you will of those things will delight us, cheer us up, and give us JOY.

LifeTruth #2: God gives us the joy He commands of us, through the person of Jesus Christ. This is HUGE. While scripture shows us that JOY is a command **of** the LORD - we also see that joy is a gift **from** the Lord. For example, it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit according to **Galatians 5:22**; The Spirit of God produces **in us** the gift of JOY. Joy is experienced when we are **with** God, **in your presence there is fullness of joy (Psalm 16:11)**. So what we learned the last 6 weeks talking about RELY - It is our faith in the person and work of Jesus that causes the Spirit of God to come and abide in us and gives us direct access to God the Father. And Jesus told his followers that if they were to remain in His love, and keep His word, **then HIS JOY would be in us and that our joy may be completed** (John 15:10). So, Joy is not optional for those who are in Christ. But the joy God requires is not something that we just produce in ourselves; He gives us this JOY through the person of Jesus. **Rejoice IN the Lord always.**

So let's tie these together: when we truly believe that something will increase our joy, we anticipate it. Christ is the way in which God gives us and completes in us HIS JOY. Therefore...

LifeTruth #3 - To anticipate the ADVENT of Christ is to anticipate the increase of your own joy. Remember what we said earlier. ADVENT is not just about the Christmas story; it is considering where we are today. Christ has come and Christ will come again. With his first arrival, JOY was possible. With His second arrival, Joy will be perfected. In the meantime Christians are called to grow up in Him and grow up in Joy.

I believe John the Baptist perfectly captured the heart of the Christian life and describes for us how we live in anticipation of his advent: **"Jesus must increase and I must decrease"** (John 3:30).

If you would say, I need more joy - the bible would say you need more of the presence of Christ. Jesus has made God known to us in His first ADVENT and He will perfect our knowledge in His second ADVENT. He enabled Joy in His first ADVENT and he will perfect Joy in his second ADVENT. And in the meantime, we anticipate his daily arrival in our lives if you will. Not that he comes and goes. But that His person increases in us. We anticipate that we will grow in

Christlikeness. That should be our hope, our goal; our attention should be put to that more than to any created thing. And as He increases, our delight in Him - our joy - increases as well.