

# “SIGNS AND SEASONS: GETTING TO THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS”

Advent 1B

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Peace Lutheran  
Grass Valley, CA

Thanksgiving Disaster:

Did you hear about the guy who dropped the Thanksgiving turkey and started an international crisis?

The downfall of Turkey,  
the breakup of China,  
and the overthrow of Greece.

~from National Geographic Kids Magazine~

Teaching Points:

- 1) For what does the heart long?
- 2) A sense of desperation seems to pervade life and culture.
- 3) Our deepest longing is to see God (a common theme of the readings)
- 4) We see God by “keeping awake”, by getting to the ‘real heart of Christmas’—our God coming to us.
- 5) “We desire God not gifts. We desire hope not fear. In this God is still faithful.”

For what does your heart truly and deeply long? What is it that your heart desires? When you sit back and reflect what soul deep longings pour into your conscious mind?

Likely responses are: “peace”; “well-being”; “harmony”; “happiness”; “joy”; “really knowing God”; “true forgiveness”; “success”; “time”; “reduced of stress”; “health” or maybe “love”. There are numerous other responses of equal value.

Just a few days ago, an ad noted “Black Friday begins on Wednesday.” We are always quite aware of how early the Christmas displays go up in retail stores, how early our radio stations start playing “Christmas music”, how early in the year the pressures start to build toward the “Holiday Season”.

Somehow, I wonder if some of this early season hype, some of our desire to have Christmas early, doesn't have something to do with the deeper longings of our hearts. I wonder if it doesn't have to do with wanting to claim clear signs of “peace and calm” -- Silent Night, Holy Night; all is calm, all is bright”. I have to wonder if earlier, longer, more Christmas has to do with the deep longings of our soul. Maybe

it is a visible symbol of what we really want for Christmas. Somehow it seems we long for a “Martha Stewart Christmas” and all we get is an “Erma Bombeck Christmas”.

With “Christmas” in full swing around us (our culture moves directly from Thanksgiving -- or even Halloween -- to Christmas), we come to a different time in our church cycles. We come to this time called Advent. “Advent” simply means “coming”, from two Latin words that mean “come toward”. During these four weeks, we will want to think about the “signs and seasons” (a theme I’ll work on during Advent) that enable the coming of our God. I want to lead our thoughts along the lines of what it means to wait for the God who comes down, the God who is faithful.

So, back to the question about what it is for which your heart longs. Maybe you said, “My heart is truly longing for God.” Or maybe, “My heart longs for God to come down.” Probably not many worded it this way.

Today’s scriptures have to do with the longing of the heart. They speak to the heart that wants to see God; the heart that longs for God to come down to us; for God to be faithful to God’s promises.

You heard that heart longing in the various verses of the Bible we read today:

From Isaiah, back a few hundred years before Jesus was born, the prophet cried out on behalf of God’s people, the lament, the plea, “Oh that you would open the heavens and come down.” A deep plea of the heart. There was a longing that God would come in ways that could not be imagined. That God would come to the world. Remember the world, for the peers of Isaiah, wasn’t very pretty. It was in ruin. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed. It was in conflict. There was famine. Everything was on its ear. The deep longing of the heart in those days was that God would come. It was that God would come down and enter into the chaos of the world. The deepest lament and longing of the heart was for God to be present.

From the Gospel, Jesus’ words are from near the end of His life. In effect, Jesus points to the time when, after His death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus would come back again in promised glory to end all the despair and suffering in the world. Jesus seems to be hinting that by the time he comes in glory, there will be a deep longing of the heart. A longing which will be so deep that there will be the need to “keep awake”, to “watch”, to expect the un-predicable.

Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, written a while after Jesus’ ascension into heaven; written to a community that was firm in believing that Jesus would almost immediately come back the promised second time, also lifts up the deep longing “for the revealing of our Lord, Jesus, Christ.” The longing is for clarity of Jesus’ in the world.

In Advent we find words to our heart's longing. We find the signs and seasons that God comes, that God will break open the heavens and come down.

I'm proposing today that the sign of this season is not found in cash registers dinging up record sales. The sign of this season is not found in fear and despair. The sign of this season is not in aborted hope, or the powers and values that permeate our culture.

Over the years, Advent, this four-week time, has had different meanings. One is that Jesus is coming into the world as a baby. Another has been that Jesus is coming back again in glory, as Jesus himself says in the words we read from Mark. The third is that Jesus is coming to us, to you and to me, that Jesus is about to be reborn—about to crack open the heavens and come down. Advent has always been about a deep longing for God.

In our culture, Advent has become a different kind of preparation time. A time to prepare more for the festivities, the programs, the parties and the gift giving. A time to get ready with lights and trees, with shopping trips and visits to relatives. In our era, Advent has little to do with its original meaning "coming toward" or "coming close".

In spite of that, the deeper longings of the heart have not changed. Still today, amid Christmas coming so early, is the deep desire for God to come, for God to open the heavens and come close. The deepest human longing is for God to be completely faithful.

The promise of Advent is that our God does come. The promise of Advent is that God is faithful, that God knows our heart and soul that deeply desires the God's presence. The promise of Advent is that God is faithful.

Advent season is a very much-needed reminder. It is a time of stirring up and shaking us. It is a time of rousing and waking of our hearts. It is a time of being alert, knowing that there are signs and seasons. It is a time for God to come toward us, lest we give up doing anything, lest we give up any spiritual preparations, let we get of track in our longings.

Our deepest desire is see God come down. Our deepest desire is to encounter the living God. The real heart of Christmas is the Christ. The real heart of Christmas is that our God does come to us. The real heart of Christmas is Christ, God alive, God on our terms, God in the flesh. God with us!!

Ultimately, "We desire God not gifts, hope not fear. We want to know that God is still faithful."

Amen.