



ADVENT WORSHIP SERIES

Come Home for Christmas

REFERENCES

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- [Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)
 - [Psalm 25:1-10](#)
 - [1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)
 - [Luke 21:25-36](#)
 - The first week of Advent has to deal with the shock. Is it time? Already? Sure, the world has been giving Christmas hints for months now, but it still seems to surprise us every year. Perhaps it is because we don't start with the Christmas story. That might be a little more palatable. No, we start with the warning signs, with the forecast for cloudy skies ahead. We start with a prophetic call to look at the world we inhabit. How close are we to the kin-dom we proclaim week after week? How close are we to this coming "on earth as it is in heaven" for which we pray regularly? Advent is about being honest.
 - But not hopeless. Advent is about the joy of longing for home – the kind of home that will complete us, the kind of home that will transform the world. It is about helping us remember that we have a mission and a hope. We are people who see God at work in this world, and we are partners in that remaking. We are the disciples who make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.
 - Worship this week, then, is that call to remember the hope. We cast a vision in our songs and prayers that holds up the kin-dom ideal and invites everyone to get ready to head home. It's time: that's our call; it's time to go home.
 - So, what do we do when we get ready to go home? We make lists. We put things in order. We set our minds on our destination. So, as we decorate our sanctuaries, we are painting a portrait of the kin-dom, light and color and vibrantly green with life, even in winter.

- Our arms are open to receive those who come, maybe for the first time, maybe old friends, maybe the usual crowd, but all are welcome in God's home, our kin-dom home. Pay attention this season to hospitality; it matters. It matters always, but especially this time, this threshold time. If the church is the glimpse of the home toward which we move, then take care to reflect the welcome that is being offered.
- Light, of course, is crucial to Advent. We light the candles on the wreath, not to count down to Christmas, **but as a beacon to call us home.** "We'll leave the light on for you" isn't just a slogan for a hotel chain, but a gospel promise that we will find our way by the light that is Jesus the Christ and now is reflected in the body of Christ, the church. So, let there be light during the season of Advent. You could, as some do, bring in more and more light each week, or you could start the season with the full complement, except for the remaining candles of the wreath, but the full complement of lights glowing in the worship space.
- The first Sunday of Advent, or the Sunday of hope in some traditions, or the prophecy candle in others, is the reminder that it is time to head home.
- Rev. Dr. Derek Weber, Director of Preaching Ministries, served churches in Indiana and Arkansas and the British Methodist Church. His PhD is from University of Edinburgh in preaching and media. He has taught preaching in seminary and conference settings for more than 20 years.



INTRODUCTION

For many people, Advent is a time of counting down the days until the BIG celebration. The season often seems filled with extra work, extra people, extra spending. Advent 2021 may mark the first time since the onset of COVID-19 and the global pandemic that families have gathered. It will definitely be the first Christmas when most families feel safe enough to reunite. Advent 2021 is an invitation to come home, whether that is to a literal home or a spiritual home. We have an invitation to make Advent and Christmas 2021 more intentional and to recapture our sense of wonder for the holidays by exploring our past memories and customs while intentionally creating new ones.

As a result of the pandemic, many of us have temporarily misplaced the participatory aspects of our faith. We watched virtual worship instead of speaking the words of the liturgy and singing the lyrics of the hymns. We slowly developed a spectator faith over a period of eighteen and more months. Re-engaging our ability to practice our faith will take a similar amount of time and effort. Using the liturgical seasons of Advent and Christmas as a jumping-off point, this small-group resource is designed to ease people out of practicing faith in isolation that quarantining for COVID-19 necessitated.

Each week will consist of: (1) a reading of a focus scripture passage from the Revised Common Lectionary (Year C), along with a brief, personal reflection; (2) a creative project or activity to prepare at home, drawing upon myriad gifts, skills, and artistic expressions; and (3) a small-group experience offering time for each participant to present a project, telling the story of how the individual developed an idea and then executed it. When possible, participants are invited to share artifacts of what they have made or done. Together, the group will process how the project has affected them, their relationships with others, and their relationship with God.

NOTE: At the time I conceived of and developed this small-group experience, immunizations were on the rise and COVID-19 cases and deaths were declining. Since that time, new immunizations have leveled off and COVID-19 is once again surging. Some of the weekly activities were designed to be practiced alone, while others rely upon in-person engagement. Please use your best judgment and research the levels of disease in your community before engaging in any in-person activities.

WEEK 1: TIME TO GO HOME

The 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. In 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. In 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"[1] (Jer. 33:14-16).

This is the scripture passage we read the Sunday after Thanksgiving.[2] Many of us will have spent some part of the holiday with family. We will have examined up-close and personally the fruit on our family trees. All family trees contain branches that have struggled to thrive, or they may even have branches that have produced some less-than-optimal fruit. This is as true of the line of David—including David himself—as it is of our own families.[3] COVID-19, vaccinations and elections not only have separated families geographically, but they have also torn families apart ideologically.

This verse reminds us of the early Jesus-followers who, when hearing this passage read in the synagogues, might have wondered if God was in the process of fulfilling the promise made to them—the house of Israel and Judah. Was God causing a righteous branch to spring up from the line of David? Is Jesus part of this famous lineage? Is Jesus the righteous fruit they have been anticipating?[4]

Holidays and families are intertwined tightly; at least in my family, they are. When I was a child in my parent's home, I was the youngest of six. Every family dinner was loud and boisterous, but the energy and excitement of a holiday meal increased the volume dramatically. With eight people gathered, there were bound to be different ideas and opinions. My parents encouraged us all to express our views and defend our positions. As adults, we all still hold different views and positions. For some of us, a shared meal is difficult to endure. Still, we gather, and we try to be civil. We avoid topics that produce the most division—religion and politics being the primary two.

From a young age, my parents modeled that a family consists of the people who gather around your table. They might be related to you by blood, and they might not. To this day, I have friends with whom I have a closer relationship than people related to me genetically or through marriage. Family consists of the people in your bubble, not the people in your bloodline.

In a class I took for my Doctor of Ministry program, we were asked to engage in several spiritual practices. One of those was to pray for someone. At the time, I was struggling in a relationship with one of my church staff. I decided to pray for that person, hoping that I would gain insight into the relationship, or, at least, gain empathy. For my part, I am not certain I gained insight, but I did gain a sense of peace and, ultimately, healing. I was able to ask for this person's forgiveness for any hurt I had caused, and, though the person did not ask it, I offered forgiveness to the individual as well. In my experience as a pastor and a person, praying for someone with whom you have a fractured relationship can initiate the healing process. Our project this week combines prayer and visual arts.

Family Tree Project – Create a family tree using any materials you wish. This could be something you draw, paint, or sculpt. Find a way to label your tree with the names of the members of your family. You may choose to include people who are biologically related to you and/or people you name and claim as family. As you create your family tree, pray for each person on your tree. Consider including family members with whom you have difficult relationships.

Weekly Discussion Questions:

1. Present your family tree. What materials did you choose to use? What are the pros and cons of your choices? What would you do the same? What would you do differently?
2. How did you decide to define family? What parameters did you use? Did you choose to include people with whom you have difficult relationships?
3. How did the practice of praying for your family members affect your relationships or your sense of those people?
4. How has this project affected you? Your relationship with someone else? Your relationship with God? [5]

[1] All scripture cited will use the New Revised Standard Version.

[2] David Lyon Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, ed. *Feasting on the Word. Year C, volume 1*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 2.

[3] *Feasting on the Word*, 5.

[4] *Feasting on the Word*, 2.

[5] In preparation for week 3, ask family members to submit the name of their favorite Christmas carol or song.