

## Advent: The Way of Love

The Christian Church has historically divided the year into seasons – Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time. Today marks the beginning of Advent. Now the church calendar doesn't follow the regular calendar as Advent is actually the beginning of the church year. So happy new year y'all!

And there's a reason why the Church year begins with Advent. Advent is a Latin Word that means coming, specifically the coming of Christ. And we focus on three different aspects of Christ coming. **First, Christ coming in final victory** – it means what we say each week in the Lord's prayer, "You're kingdom come,[pause] your will be done on Earth [[pause] as it is in heaven." Advent proclaims the hope that one day peace, love, and justice will prevail upon the Earth and all violence, oppression, and injustice shall end.

Secondly, in Advent, we prepare to once again celebrate Jesus' birth and will hear the stories of John the Baptist and Mary and Joseph. And finally, Advent is a time of personal preparation, a time to ponder and reflect what it means to once again invite Jesus into our lives, communities, and world.

This year, I'm planning to pair my sermons with my favorite Advent hymn, "Awake, Awake and Greet the New Morn." The choir sang one of the verses of that hymn for the introit this morning. And each week, in my sermon, I will try to offer a reflection based on the verse the choir sings that week. Listen again to the words of that hymn the choir sang earlier:

Rejoice, rejoice, take heart in the night,  
Though cold the winter and cheerless,  
The rising sun shall crown you with light,  
Be strong and loving and fearless;  
Love be our song and love our prayer,  
And love, our endless story,  
May God fill every day we share,  
And bring us at last into glory.  
Be strong and loving and fearless.

For my first ten years after I graduated seminary, I had the privilege of starting and serving as pastor of a church called Community Church without Walls that was located Birmingham's west end neighborhood, a community that was perceived as one that was nothing more than its challenges: poverty, failing schools, crime, and violence.

But perceptions usually don't reflect reality. No doubt that community had all of those challenges, but what the stereotypes didn't reflect is the sheer courage, hope, resilience, and love of the people in that neighborhood.

When I was starting Community Church without Walls, there was one person whose philosophy informed what we were trying to do more than any other—John Perkins. Dr. Perkins is a black man who grew up in segregated Mississippi. When he was beaten nearly to death by a Mississippi state patrol officer, his family sent him to California to simply get away from segregation. He married, started a family, and became a successful business man. But as he became more involved in his church and grew in his faith, he and his wife Vera Mae felt God calling them back to Mississippi, so they returned. They became Civil Rights leaders, thus putting their very lives at risk. After segregation ending, Perkins believed that a new way of doing ministry in low-income areas was needed, so he started what became a national network known as the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA) that insisted those working in under-resourced communities must do ministry with the community rather than for them. Rejecting a mindset that those who are poor need to be “saved,” Perkins believed that the people in the communities themselves knew what their communities needed—they were the experts.

With this philosophy, Dr. Perkins, and other leaders within CCDA alongside local community leaders, developed some of the most creative and transformative ministries I know about. Near the end of my time at Church without Walls, I took a group of young adults, all of whom had grown up in our church, to a retreat at Dr. Perkin's place in Jackson, MS. By then, he was in his 80s and was not involved in the day to day aspect of the ministries he had started, but he still graciously agreed to meet with the groups that visited.

After our session with him, most of our group had gone to play basketball on the courts right outside the guest house, but several of us stayed in the house with Dr. Perkins. He became reflective and began by telling us that “love is everything.” Then to illustrate he told us about what it was like to be Civil Rights leaders in Mississippi:

*“You didn't know if there was a bomb planted somewhere outside your house or if you were going to be picked up by the police and beaten to death in jail or if a mob might lynch you. Vera Mae and I were targets, but we had such good friends. Every night, one of our friends sat watch on our porch. They stayed up all night so they could alert us if there was any danger.”* And then, he started weeping, *“They risked their lives to care for us. They risked their lives for the cause of Civil Rights.”*

He was quiet for a few moments as he composed himself, and then he said, *“That's why I say love is everything. My friends loved us enough, they cared enough about Civil Rights, they cared enough about us that they were willing to die if they had to. That's love.”*

Friends, that is the kind of love that we proclaim at Advent. This kind of love is how God chose to break into our world in the person of Jesus. 2000 years ago, the world was ruled by the Roman emperor Caesar. And virtually every title that we use for Jesus this time of year, the emperor, at that time claimed for himself.

Prince of Peace, Lord and Savior, King of Kings, Son of God. Caesar claimed everyone of those titles. When the gospel writers declare Jesus to be these things, they are contrasting who Jesus is and what he came to do with the way of the emperor, the way of Empire.

Caesar brought peace through killing his enemies. Jesus sought peace by being willing to die.

Caesar would do anything to gain power. Jesus willingly gave up all power.

Caesar trusted in his army. Jesus trusted in love.

It turns out that it takes way more strength to come in love than it does to come in power. It takes way more courage to live by love than it does to trust in force. It's why the prophet proclaims that one day all will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up sword against nation and neither will they learn war anymore."

Think about the audacity of the prophet's words. All we have to do is turn on the news to know that it seems like swords are remaining swords. And yet the prophet defiantly dares to proclaim that the violence and oppression of the world will not have the last word. Love will. Peace will. Plowshares and pruning hooks will. God will.

Like the prophets before us, Advent is the time when we too find the audacity to claim that love, hope, and peace will have the final say. And we believe this precisely because of the story we proclaim this time of year.

The Advent story is the story of God who is strong enough to relinquish power, strong enough to come to us in the most vulnerable way imaginable—a helpless baby. It's the story not of consolidating power through allegiances with the wealthy and strong, but rather a birth story where outcasts like shepherds and foreigners first heard the news. It's the story of God's salvation coming to us not through force, not in power, but by relationship, by love.

The Advent story promises that real strength is not in one's capacity to use violence, not in one's capacity to lead armies, not in the size of one's bank account, not in the influence of one's friends. Rather, the Advent story promises that strength is in relentlessly choosing love, no matter the consequence and no matter how scary it may be. It's John Perkin's friends sitting outside his house. It's God coming to us in a baby born in a manger.

And this is the story that we are invited to make our story. So as we enter into the season of Advent, may we all be strong and loving and fearless and may we let love be our song, and love our prayer, and love our endless story.

This is what Advent is all about. Amen.