

Good morning and welcome to worship on this first Sunday of Advent 2020.

I don't know how you are feeling this morning. For many, this past year has been a time of great difficulty, anxiety, uncertainty as we have witnessed the fragility of humanity. Throughout the world, and indeed within our own nation we have seen responses to COVID-19 changing daily, sometimes hourly with the coronavirus causing much heartache, grief and pain. As we look to the lifting of this second national lockdown and the hope of a vaccine for this terrible virus, we confess that none of us know the future, but in the words of Corrie Ten Boom, we should "*Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to an all-knowing God*" and it is our all-knowing God who brings to each one of us hope.

Romans 5:1-5 says:

5 Therefore, since we have been made right in God's sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. **2** Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory.

3 We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. **4** And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. **5** And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

Let us pray: A Prayer for the First Sunday of Advent.

Father God, let your hope arise in our hearts! Lift our eyes up to see that you alone are where our hope comes from. Help us to shake off the anxiety, discouragements, and distractions that have filled this year.

May we pause to remember that we have hope in you.

You know the end of our stories, and we give thanks because you have promised that it will be a victorious ending. Give us the grace we need to wrap up this year joyfully.

On this first Sunday of Advent we invite your Spirit into this beautiful Advent season. Renew our sense of holy anticipation! Let us be those who are waiting eagerly for Jesus to come again.

More than anything, we ask that you be glorified in this season of expectation. Amen.

Song: In Christ alone.

This time of Advent is a chance to focus our thoughts on the gift God has given us in his Son Jesus Christ who stepped down from heaven and took the form of a man so that we might have hope and believe.

The tradition for the first Sunday of Advent includes lighting the Candle of Hope.

The Candle of Hope symbolizes promises delivered through the prophets from God as well as the hope we have in Jesus Christ. As a result of sin which entered our world due to Adam and Eve's disobedience causing the loss of a right and holy relation between humankind and our Creator, God put in place a great rescue plan that he lays out in scripture. This plan foretells years in advance the arrival of Jesus. The Bible also gives us a glimpse of the future, when salvation's plan is fully realised and the right relationship with our God, the Creator of all that was, is and forevermore will be, will be finally restored.

This first Sunday of Advent we read, pray, and reflect on the hope God's plan gives to us foretold by the prophets and fulfilled by the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, and we meditate on the promise of his glorious second coming.

Today, let us together light the candle of hope, as we give thanks and praise to God for sending us Jesus Christ, our Lord, Saviour and King who came to take us out of darkness into his wonderful light.

Let's worship him, our Way Maker.

Let us pray to our Father God, using the prayer that Jesus taught his followers to pray. **The Lord's prayer:**

Our Father who art in Heaven,
Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
And forgive us our trespasses
As we forgive those who trespass against us;
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory,
Forever and ever. Amen.

First Scripture reading: Jeremiah 33:1-17.

While Jeremiah was still confined in the courtyard of the guard, the LORD gave him this second message: ² "This is what the LORD says—the LORD who made the earth, who formed and established it, whose name is the LORD: ³ Ask me and I will tell you remarkable secrets you do not know about things to come. ⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: You have torn down the houses of this city and even the king's palace to get materials to strengthen the walls against the siege ramps and swords of the enemy. ⁵ You expect to fight the Babylonians,^[a] but the men of this city are already as good as dead, for I have determined to destroy them in my terrible anger. I have abandoned them because of all their wickedness.

⁶ "Nevertheless, the time will come when I will heal Jerusalem's wounds and give it prosperity and true peace. ⁷ I will restore the fortunes of Judah and Israel and rebuild their towns. ⁸ I will cleanse them of their sins against me and forgive all their sins of rebellion. ⁹ Then this city will bring me joy, glory, and honour before all the nations of the earth! The people of the world will see all the good I do for my people, and they will tremble with awe at the peace and prosperity I provide for them.

¹⁰ "This is what the LORD says: You have said, 'This is a desolate land where people and animals have all disappeared.' Yet in the empty streets of Jerusalem and Judah's other towns, there will be heard once more ¹¹ the sounds of joy and laughter. The joyful voices of bridegrooms and brides will be heard again, along with the joyous songs of people bringing thanksgiving offerings to the LORD. They will sing,

'Give thanks to the LORD of Heaven's Armies,
for the LORD is good.
His faithful love endures forever!'

For I will restore the prosperity of this land to what it was in the past, says the LORD.

¹² "This is what the LORD of Heaven's Armies says: This land—though it is now desolate and has no people and animals—will once more have pastures where shepherds can lead their flocks. ¹³ Once again shepherds will count their flocks in the towns of the hill country, the foothills of Judah,^[a] the Negev, the land of Benjamin, the vicinity of Jerusalem, and all the towns of Judah. I, the LORD, have spoken!

¹⁴ "The day will come, says the LORD, when I will do for Israel and Judah all the good things I have promised them.

¹⁵ "In those days and at that time
I will raise up a righteous descendant^[a] from King David's line.
He will do what is just and right throughout the land.

¹⁶ In that day Judah will be saved,

and Jerusalem will live in safety.
And this will be its name:
'The LORD Is Our Righteousness.'^[a]

¹⁷ For this is what the LORD says: David will have a descendant sitting on the throne of Israel forever.

Song: Angels from the realms of glory.

Second Scripture reading: Matthew 24:37-44:

³⁷ "When the Son of Man returns, it will be like it was in Noah's day. ³⁸ In those days before the flood, the people were enjoying banquets and parties and weddings right up to the time Noah entered his boat. ³⁹ People didn't realize what was going to happen until the flood came and swept them all away. That is the way it will be when the Son of Man comes.

⁴⁰ "Two men will be working together in the field; one will be taken, the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding flour at the mill; one will be taken, the other left.

⁴² "So you, too, must keep watch! For you don't know what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ Understand this: If a homeowner knew exactly when a burglar was coming, he would keep watch and not permit his house to be broken into. ⁴⁴ You also must be ready all the time, for the Son of Man will come when least expected.

Song: A Christmas Alleluia.

Sermon: First Sunday in Advent – Be ready.

The scripture text I want us to focus on for a few moments this morning is found at the end of our Bible Reading from Matthew 24 verse 44 ... *"So then, you also must always be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you are not expecting him."*

The writer of Matthew's Gospel is emphasising not just the coming judgment on the nation of Israel but the certainty that one day the Lord Jesus Christ shall come back as 'King of Kings' and 'Lord of Lords' to claim his own which Christians today refer to as 'The Second Coming of Jesus.'

In the scripture passage that was read, we see that Jesus is instructing and encouraging his disciples to be ready for both of these events.

Repeatedly Jesus emphasised judgment and the certainty of his victorious second coming and he urged his disciples to be ready for whatever the future might hold for them.

If we were to go through the New Testament carefully, we would see that the second coming of Jesus was one of the most important teachings made by the early church.

It was in the hope of his return that the early Christians lived, laboured, suffered and gave of themselves completely in the cause of Jesus Christ.

As Christians today, we believe that in the fullness of time, Jesus came some 2020 years ago, and as we move towards the end of Year 2020 Anno Domini, this being Latin for 'In the Year of our Lord,' studying God's Word with 2020 vision, which in terms of vision we know to be 'perfect sight' then we will see that in the fullness of time, Jesus will come again a second time.

In the New Testament there is reference to the second coming of Jesus more than some three hundred times. Here is just a few of those references:

In John 14:1-3 we read that Jesus said: *"Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me. There is more than enough room in my Father's home. If this were not so, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am."*

In speaking about future times we read in Luke 21: that Jesus said, *"Watch out! Don't let your hearts be dulled by carousing and drunkenness, and by the worries of this life. Don't let that day catch you unaware, like a trap. For that day will come upon everyone living on the earth. Keep alert at all times. And pray that you might be strong enough to escape these coming horrors and stand before the Son of Man."*

AND - After the death and resurrection of Jesus we read in Acts 1:11 that immediately after his ascension to heaven two white-robed men suddenly stood among the disciples and said, *"Men of Galilee," ... , why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go."*

Today, we need to be mindful and attentive with regard to Jesus's promise that he will return, and for that time of which none no-one knows neither the date nor hour, we need to follow his command to be 'ever ready.'

So the first question we need to ask ourselves this morning is: "Are we 'ever ready' for the return of Jesus, every moment of every day that we 'live-out,' or perhaps it would be better say 'out-live' our Christian lives and witness?"

The second question I want us to ask ourselves relates to the Luke 21 reference: "How are we preparing not only ourselves but also others with regard to *'that day which will come upon everyone living on the earth'* because if we don't take out and share the good news message about Jesus's coming and about his 'yet to occur' second coming, who on God's earth will?

We pray and have prayed even today *"Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."* Do we really mean what we pray? Do we have that sense of urgency, that fire within our bellies like the early church had to share the Good

News Message of Jesus Christ to our world and fellow humankind so that none are lost to his Kingdom?

We may not know the time nor the hour, but this much we do know – every day that we live, we are one day nearer to Jesus's return, and so is everyone else, and if we don't declare Jesus Christ to the world, who in God's name will?

Do our lives tell out the living, life giving, story of Jesus? From the outside looking in, do we as a church physically and spiritually tell out the story of Jesus in the very best, life-changing way that we possibly can, because it is our duty, our mission, our commission to be his witnesses so that when the day of judgement comes 'all may be saved.'

So what do we need to do?

On this first Sunday in Advent, this first Sunday of the new Christian calendar as Stephen pointed out last week, we firstly need to fully recognise and understand why Jesus came to our earth as 'the helpless Babe of Bethlehem.'

John chapter 3:16 is quite clear about this, in fact it can't be any clearer when the Gospel, the Good News message of Saint John says: *"For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, (and here's the why) so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."*

We need to be sharing this good news message of salvation loud and clear by every possible means so that those who don't yet know God's Kingship within their lives might be brought in and adopted into the family of God becoming inheritors of God's Kingdom through the witness and testimony of you and of me.

The Apostle Paul testified to this in his letter to the church at Galatia found in Galatians 4:4-8. And this is what he said: *"But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father." Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir.*

The Apostle Paul here witnesses so perfectly to the great hope we celebrate at Christmas! Without God's intervention, we were all slaves, bound up by our 'sin nature,' hopelessly heading to the grave and eternal damnation. But because of God's great love for us, he came down and rescued humanity by sending his Son Jesus, the Christ, as a sacrifice for our sin so we could be free from the chains of sin, and be saved in and through his precious blood shed upon the cruel cross of calvary.

I am reminded here of the words of a chorus from an anonymous writer:

At the Cross! At the Cross! where I first saw the light,
And the burden of my heart rolled away,
It was there by faith I received my sight,
And now I am happy all the day!

May that be the experience of each one of us this morning.

But salvation doesn't stop there. Salvation is dynamic, it's a process characterised by constant change, activity, or progress and we have that hope of full and final completion forevermore in a day that is yet to come. In his book, *The Gospel According to Paul*, A.M. Hunter puts it like this:

“When Paul thought about Christian salvation, he saw it as a word with three tenses. It meant a past event, a present experience, and a future hope. ‘We were saved’, he says in Romans 8:24; ‘We are being saved’, he says in 1 Corinthians 15:2; and ‘We shall be saved’ he says in Romans 5:9. Romans 5:1-2 brings all three tenses together which we read right at the beginning of our worship:

“Therefore, since we have been made right in God’s sight by faith, we have peace with God because of what Jesus Christ our Lord has done for us. Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of undeserved privilege where we now stand, and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God’s glory.”

As we look forward to that which is ‘yet to come’, we need to fully recognise and understand the purpose for Jesus’s second coming.

Now, I’m not going to read out every single scripture reference I have in full, I’ll leave that for you to do maybe through the week ahead at the beginning of this Advent season and new Christian calendar, but if we take a brief walk through scripture we will see concerning the second coming of Jesus that scripture tells us:

- Jesus will come again so that his lordship might be recognised (found in Philippians 2:9-11);
- Jesus will come again to raise the dead (found in Thessalonians 4:16-18);
- Jesus will come again to receive his own (found in John 14:1-3);
- Jesus will come again to complete our salvation (found in Hebrews 9:28);
- Jesus will come again to reward the faithful (found in Revelation 22:12);
- Jesus will come again to judge the wicked (found in Acts 17:30-31);
- Jesus will come again to establish peace (found in Isaiah 2).

So then, how can we be ready for Jesus’s second coming?

If we want to be ready for the second coming of Jesus Christ, first and foremost we must be saved. We must trust Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour from the oppression and hold that sin has upon our lives. We must experience spiritual new birth. Apart from this experience of faith, trust and commitment to Jesus Christ, we cannot possibly be ready for his second coming.

If we want to be ready, we must be busy about our Master’s business until he comes. After his resurrection, just prior to his ascension we read in Acts 1:8 that Jesus said, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere - in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”*

We must not be lethargic or lukewarm about spreading the message of his death and resurrection. We should be 'fired up' and 'on fire' with regard to bringing about hope and salvation to the uttermost ends of the earth in all we think, do, say and seek to be for God's Kingdoms sake.

If we want to be ready, we must be faithful. In 2 Peter 3:17 we read, "*You already know these things, dear friends. So be on guard; then you will not be carried away by the errors of wicked people and lose your own secure footing.*" It is not enough that we be faithful for a time. We must be faithful all of the time. Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will come suddenly and unexpectedly.

If we want to be ready, we need to be looking forward to his second coming expectantly. In that wonderful book which begins, "*The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave ...*", John writes in the very last chapter of Revelation 22:20, "*He who is the faithful witness to all these things says, "Yes, I am coming soon!" Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!*"

As we prepare our hearts to celebrate Jesus's arrival as a gift to all humanity, let us stir up in our hearts and homes a sense of anticipation of his glorious return. Over this Advent season we pray that eternal hope would rise up in our spirits in a tangible and life-giving way so that as we enter into 2021, we might be the people that God wills and wants us to be until his Kingdom comes or calls us home. Amen.

Intercessory Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, born in a stable, give courage to all who are homeless;
Lord Jesus Christ, who fled into Egypt, give comfort to all refugees;
Lord Jesus Christ, who fasted in the desert, give relief to all who are hungry,
Lord Jesus Christ, who hung in torment on the cross, give strength to all who suffer;
Lord Jesus Christ, who died to save us all, give us the assurance of your forgiveness;
Lord Jesus Christ, who gives us hope for the future, and for whose second coming we watch and we pray, continue to work out salvations plan in and through us so that we might be used according to your loving purposes, for your glory's sake.
Lord Jesus Christ, be with the whole of our church family and with all those we bring to you in a moment of silence who need a special touch from you just now. Amen.

Closing song by Chris Tomlin and We The Kingdom: [Christmas Day.](#)

And so, from the very last book, the very last chapter, the very last verse of scripture, ... The revelation of Jesus Christ: "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with God's people. Amen.*" (Revelation 22:21).