

The Cradle in the Shadow of the Cross

An Advent Series



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Everybody wants to celebrate Christmas in July (take a peek at Hallmark Channel). But do they want to celebrate what Christmas means, or is it the gifts, family, and good feelings? Everyone seems more helpful and kind in December, unlike other months of the year.

But if we celebrate Christmas in July, shouldn't we follow that up with Easter because Christmas (and Advent) are both preparations for Easter? Jesus didn't become incarnate so that we would have a holiday where we could give each other gifts and enjoy extra family time. The original Christmas morning was the beginning of the journey to the cross.

People tend to keep Christmas and Easter well separated because, at Christmas, we celebrate a harmless baby boy we can admire, but at Easter, we meet a redeemer with expectations.

This series will connect the baby boy Mary gave birth to with the son she watched die on the cross and then be resurrected three days later. As we study the stories of Christmas, we will explore the connection to the Easter story.

First Sunday of Advent

A Seven-Pound Bundle of Hope
Isaiah 9:6-7; Romans 13:11-14

Isaiah 9:6-7 NLT

6 For a child is born to us,
a son is given to us.

The government will rest on his shoulders.

And he will be called:

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 His government and its peace
will never end.

He will rule with fairness and justice from the throne of his ancestor David
for all eternity.

The passionate commitment of the Lord of Heaven's Armies
will make this happen!

Romans 13:11-14 NLT

11 This is all the more urgent, for you know how late it is; time is running out. Wake up, for our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. 12 The night is almost gone; the day of salvation will soon be here. So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living. 13 Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires.

Sermon: Main Idea

Our Advent hope arrived in a very small package with a very big mission. And now it is our job to live into that hope in such a way that others will come to know Christ our Savior.

Second Sunday of Advent

God's Promises are Real
Isaiah 11:1-10; Isaiah 52:13-15

Isaiah 11:1-10 NLT

A Branch from David's Line

11 Out of the stump of David's family will grow a shoot—
yes, a new Branch bearing fruit from the old root.

2 And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

3 He will delight in obeying the Lord.
He will not judge by appearance
nor make a decision based on hearsay.

4 He will give justice to the poor
and make fair decisions for the exploited.
The earth will shake at the force of his word,
and one breath from his mouth will destroy the wicked.

5 He will wear righteousness like a belt
and truth like an undergarment.

6 In that day the wolf and the lamb will live together;
the leopard will lie down with the baby goat.
The calf and the yearling will be safe with the lion,
and a little child will lead them all.

7 The cow will graze near the bear.
The cub and the calf will lie down together.
The lion will eat hay like a cow.

8 The baby will play safely near the hole of a cobra.
Yes, a little child will put its hand in a nest of deadly snakes without harm.

9 Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,
for as the waters fill the sea,
so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord.

10 In that day the heir to David's throne
will be a banner of salvation to all the world.
The nations will rally to him,
and the land where he lives will be a glorious place.

Isaiah 52:13-15 NLT

The Lord's Suffering Servant

13 See, my servant will prosper;

he will be highly exalted.

14 But many were amazed when they saw him.

His face was so disfigured he seemed hardly human,

and from his appearance, one would scarcely know he was a man.

15 And he will startle many nations.

Kings will stand speechless in his presence.

For they will see what they had not been told;

they will understand what they had not heard about.

Sermon: Main Idea

Read through the Old Testament and you will find every promise God made he was faithful to keep. God promised a Savior, described his arrival and his life and death. All came true.

Therefore, we can trust his promise that Christ will return.

Third Sunday of Advent

The Joy and Pain of Motherhood
Luke 1:39-56; John 19:16-27

Luke 1:39-56 NLT

Mary Visits Elizabeth

39 A few days later Mary hurried to the hill country of Judea, to the town 40 where Zechariah lived. She entered the house and greeted Elizabeth. 41 At the sound of Mary's greeting, Elizabeth's child leaped within her, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

42 Elizabeth gave a glad cry and exclaimed to Mary, "God has blessed you above all women, and your child is blessed. 43 Why am I so honored, that the mother of my Lord should visit me? 44 When I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. 45 You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said."

The Magnificat: Mary's Song of Praise

46 Mary responded,

"Oh, how my soul praises the Lord.

47 How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!

48 For he took notice of his lowly servant girl,
and from now on all generations will call me blessed.

49 For the Mighty One is holy,
and he has done great things for me.

50 He shows mercy from generation to generation
to all who fear him.

51 His mighty arm has done tremendous things!
He has scattered the proud and haughty ones.

52 He has brought down princes from their thrones
and exalted the humble.

53 He has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away with empty hands.

54 He has helped his servant Israel
and remembered to be merciful.

55 For he made this promise to our ancestors,
to Abraham and his children forever."

56 Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months and then went back to her own home.

John 19:16-27 NLT

16 Then Pilate turned Jesus over to them to be crucified.

The Crucifixion

So they took Jesus away. 17 Carrying the cross by himself, he went to the place called Place of the Skull (in Hebrew, Golgotha). 18 There they nailed him to the cross. Two others were crucified

with him, one on either side, with Jesus between them. 19 And Pilate posted a sign on the cross that read, “Jesus of Nazareth,[a] the King of the Jews.” 20 The place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek, so that many people could read it.

21 Then the leading priests objected and said to Pilate, “Change it from ‘The King of the Jews’ to ‘He said, I am King of the Jews.’”

22 Pilate replied, “No, what I have written, I have written.”

23 When the soldiers had crucified Jesus, they divided his clothes among the four of them. They also took his robe, but it was seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. 24 So they said, “Rather than tearing it apart, let’s throw dice[b] for it.” This fulfilled the Scripture that says, “They divided my garments among themselves and threw dice for my clothing.”[c] So that is what they did.

25 Standing near the cross were Jesus’ mother, and his mother’s sister, Mary (the wife of Clopas), and Mary Magdalene. 26 When Jesus saw his mother standing there beside the disciple he loved, he said to her, “Dear woman, here is your son.” 27 And he said to this disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from then on, this disciple took her into his home.

Sermon: Main Idea

Mary experienced the highest joys and deepest hurts of any mother. Exploring her life as a mother will help us in our journey to be the best mothers to our children. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross didn’t just affect him, Mary lost her son and gained eternal salvation all in a matter of hours.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

We Were Loved When We Were Unlovable

Luke 2:8-20; 1 John 4:10

Luke 2:8-20

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

1 John 4:7-16

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

Sermon: Main Idea

Why would a perfect God love an imperfect people? Why send a Savior many will reject? Only because in his perfection God can't not love us. He created us from the lowly shepherds to the mighty kings and presidents, and we are all unconditionally loved by him and saved by his Son.

Christmas Eve

Christmas in the Shadow of the Cross John 1:1-14; Titus 3:3-7

John 1: 1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4 In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome[a] it.

6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. 8 He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. 11 He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. 12 Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Titus 3:3-7

3 At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Sermon: Main Idea

Tonight, we celebrate. A child is born. A child who has changed the world. But he did it at a great cost. He gave up his life, redeemed his people, and promised eternity. But now it is our turn. Will you accept the gift this baby is? Will you believe in the salvation of his resurrection? It's now up to you.

Advent Wreath Meditations

First Sunday of Advent: Hope

Isaiah 2:2-4

2 This is what Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

2 In the last days the mountain
of the Lord's temple will be established,
as the highest of the mountains;
it will be exalted above the hills,
and all nations will stream to it.

3 Many peoples will come and say,
"Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,
to the temple of the God of Jacob.

He will teach us his ways,
so that we may walk in his paths."

The law will go out from Zion,
the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

4 He will judge between the nations,
and will settle disputes for many peoples.
They will beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.

Author Jean Kerr, wrote, "Hope is the feeling you have that the feeling you have isn't permanent." If we are having a horrible day but have no knowledge of God's promises for the future, it is very difficult to have hope. Right now, the world seems determined to destroy itself with evil. Mass shootings, hateful rhetoric on social media, divisions across all parts of society, and promotion of sinful behavior. We seem to be on a dark path that makes it difficult to see the light of the future in our present days.

Right now, Satan seems to have the upper hand. But Satan's reign will not last forever. In his great Revelation, John writes, "*After this I saw a vast crowd, too great to count, from every nation and tribe and people and language, standing in front of the throne and before the Lamb. They were clothed in white robes and held palm branches in their hands. And they were shouting with a great roar, 'Salvation comes from our God who sits on the throne and from the Lamb!'*"
Revelation 7:9-10

Every time we gaze into the face of a newborn baby, we see hope. But the baby we are celebrating this season is the ultimate hope. This time of year, we celebrate the virgin birth, the baby in the manger visited by shepherds. He lay in a cave, not a palace, born into poverty, yet our world's

only hope. Eventually, he hung on a cross, gave up his mother to his cousin, and experienced separation from God for the first time. Yet, I don't believe he experienced hopelessness but was able to see the light despite the darkness of that day. Because he knew hope, so can we.

Light the first candle.

Dear God, as we light this first candle of the advent wreath, let us focus on the hope we have, not because of what we can do, but because of what you have done for us. In this advent season, as we look forward again to the birth of our salvation, let us remember that hope is contagious. Give us opportunities this week to share our hope with those who have no hope. Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent: Prophecy

Luke 1:26-38

Light the first candle.

²⁶ *In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."*

²⁹ *Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."*

³⁴ *"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"*

³⁵ *The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For no word from God will ever fail."*

³⁸ *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.*

Prophecies are God's promises to his people. The Old Testament is full of promises to the Israelites, including many promises of the coming Messiah. The Old Testament prophets were responsible for sharing God's prophecies, and they were faithful to tell the people, but the people wouldn't listen. Therefore, they were not ready for the Messiah when he arrived.

Our passage is also a prophecy. Mary is told that she would soon be with child and that the child would be the Savior of the people. This was foretold in Isaiah, *"All right then, the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel (which means 'God is with us'). 7:14* Additionally, in chapter nine, Isaiah tells us again that the Messiah will arrive as a baby, *"For a child is born to us, a son is given to us." 9:6.*

If you study the promises in the Old Testament, you will discover that the angel Gabriel was correct when he said, *"For no word from God will ever fail."* ³⁷. Everything God spoke through his prophets is true, not one time has God failed to keep his promises to us. Therefore, we can be confident today that all God has promised about the future and the return of Christ to rule the world will come to pass. Can you say, like Mary, "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

Light the second candle.

Dear God, you have never failed us, though we have often failed you. Guide our words and actions this Advent season so that our promises to others will be as faithful as yours. May we also be your servants and share with those we meet your promise of a Savior fulfilled in Christ that lonely night so many years ago. Lord, may your word to us be realized. Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent: Joy

Matthew 2:1-12

Light the first and second candles.

2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him."

3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written:

*6 "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for out of you will come a ruler
who will shepherd my people, Israel."*

7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him."

9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

This is the season where joy gets a lot of attention. We sing songs about joy; our ornaments and other Christmas decorations have joy written all over them. The wise men "*were overjoyed*" when they saw the star, and no doubt when, they found the baby, Jesus. He was just a little one, maybe one to two years old, yet they knew great things were coming from the baby sitting on Mary's lap.

The three gifts they gave to Jesus were not just something they picked up at Walmart on their way to Bethlehem. They had special meaning, showing us that the Magi understood more about Jesus than the Jewish leaders knew. Gold was given to represent Jesus' kingship. Daniel's prophecy tells us his kingship is one that will never be destroyed. The author of Hebrews reminds his readers that God said, "*You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.*" 5:6. We can have joy knowing that when Christ returns, he will be our king forever in a perfect kingdom.

The second gift, frankincense represents Jesus' deity. Because frankincense was burned in the temple as an offering to God, the Magi were confirming that Jesus was not just an ordinary person, but one who was fully human and fully God. Myrrh was often used to embalm bodies after death. This gift represents Christ's gift of salvation through his death and resurrection.

These three gifts identified Jesus as the promised Messiah. And as the Old Testament has promised, he is king and God, and in his awe-inspiring grace, he died that we might live. Joy came to these men because they were in the presence of God; joy comes to us this holiday season when we find ourselves in the presence of God, worshiping him for all he is and does.

Light the third candle.

Dear God, only through you can we find joy; it is never in the things we have or the people we know. Pure joy comes not when we open a big pile of presents but when we find ourselves in your presence. Lord, this holiday season, let us remember that the joy of the season does not come in the gifts we are given, the decorations and food we plan, or in the gatherings of our families, but in celebrating your Son who came to set us free. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love

John 3:16-19

Light the first, second, and third candles.

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. 19 This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

For God so loved the world... probably one of the most recognized scripture passages. Even those who have never read a Bible or were raised in a church have heard this passage. We teach our children to recite it, we know it ourselves. But do we believe it deep in our hearts. Do we really believe that God loves us enough to sacrifice his Son for our salvation.

Look at the history of the world as written about in the Bible. We humans have argued, rebelled, bargained, defied, and turned our backs on God. He gave the Israelites a land filled with milk and honey and asked only that *"You must not have any other God but me."* Deut. 5:7. The Israelites sought love through worship of the gods of their neighbors, we seek love by worshiping our jobs, possessions, money, and each other. And yet, all these years later God sent his Son *"not to condemn us"* but to save us.

God offers us light, but we prefer the darkness. He offers us holy, perfect love, but we prefer to look to the world for our satisfaction. We will soon celebrate God's ultimate gift of love born in a manger. He lived a perfect life, sharing his perfect love with all he met in his daily walks. And then chose to die for our sins so that we wouldn't have to. God's love through his Son is unconditional, perfect, full, and complete.

We can choose to seek the imperfect, unpredictable love of this world, or the perfect love offered us in his Son. It's our choice to accept Christ as our Lord and Savior, or to reject him and stand condemned. As for me, I choose Christ.

Light the fourth candle.

Dear God, We sought love in the wrong places for too long. We want to experience your perfect love for us. As we prepare to celebrate the birth of the world's Savior again, let us remember you did not come into the world to condemn us but to save us and offer eternal life. Through this Advent and Christmas season, help us to recognize your love for us and help us to offer your love to others. Amen.

Christmas Eve: Faith

Light the four candles surrounding the Christ candle.

Isaiah 9:2-7

2 The people walking in darkness
 have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of deep darkness
 a light has dawned.

3 You have enlarged the nation
 and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you
 as people rejoice at the harvest,
as warriors rejoice
 when dividing the plunder.

4 For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
 you have shattered
the yoke that burdens them,
 the bar across their shoulders,
 the rod of their oppressor.

5 Every warrior's boot used in battle
 and every garment rolled in blood
will be destined for burning,
 will be fuel for the fire.

6 For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given,
 and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
 there will be no end.
He will reign on David's throne
 and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it
 with justice and righteousness
 from that time on and forever.
The zeal of the Lord Almighty
 will accomplish this.

We began this Advent season talking about hope. Hope does not exist in a vacuum, it joins promises, joy, and love and culminates in faith. For as the author of Hebrews writes, "*Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.*" Hebrews 11:1.

It was by faith that Noah built the ark even though he had never seen rain. It is by faith that Abraham left his father and traveled to a new land. It was by faith that Sarah was able to have a child in her old age. And faith that prepared Mary for the promise of a baby, though she was a virgin.

And the shepherds, in the fields near Bethlehem, after hearing the promises of the angels singing above them by faith, walked into town looking for the promised Messiah. And when they found him, they left “glorifying and praising God,” for their faith was proven true when they saw the Christ child lying in a manger.

It is with faith tonight that we remember all the wonderful things that happened so many years ago. It is with faith that we go out tonight proclaiming joy to the world, for we celebrate tonight the promise of salvation. This child whose birth we commemorate tonight will have his life cut short as he takes on the sin of the world. And will one day return proclaiming the throne of David and establishing his perfect kingdom to which we are all invited.

Newborn baby...wise lad in the Temple...shepherd to the lost people of Israel...Savior of the world! *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.* Tonight, we celebrate!

Light the Christ Candle.

Dear God, we pause on this special night to prepare our hearts for a beautiful celebration: Your birth and coming to earth as our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Clear our minds so we can focus on You and the joy You bring us through Your gift of salvation. May the same awe and expectation that filled Mary, the chosen mother of Jesus, consume us and draw us close to You. May our spirits cry out, “Alleluia,” with the host of angels who first delivered the good news of great joy to humble shepherds that night so long ago—the news that would literally one day be heard around the world.

Help us remember and reflect on the awesome prophecies predicting Your birth. Give us eyes of faith to see on this side of the cross what prophets chose to believe through promises and visions. Immanuel, God with Us, Prince of Peace, the Son of God, Messiah—may all that You are, saturate our senses and fill our hearts with gratitude and worship as we bow this evening before You and offer our prayer to You. Amen.