

READ THIS FIRST

“Behold, I Am Coming Soon”

Note from Pastor Luke Simmons

The mission of Second Mile Church is to “embody Jesus’ mission and message in every place that God sends us.” One of the key ways we do this is by living lives that are counter-cultural and beautifully attractive to a lost and hopeless world.

There is no better time of year to live counter-culturally than during the weeks leading up to Christmas known as “Advent.” While the culture around us is overspending, over-eating, and over-scheduling, we have the opportunity to calmly refocus ourselves on Jesus, rejoicing that he came to die for sinners and that he promises to come again to restore all of creation. Rather than setting our hopes on the temporal pleasures of the season, we can set our hopes on the eternal promise of knowing Jesus.

The celebration of the season of Advent (which means “coming” or “arrival”) dates back to the fourth century. It is a time that focuses our attention on Jesus Christ’s birth and ministry as well as his Second Coming when he will return to redeem all of creation and rule with all power and authority. Just like you would prepare your home for the arrival of an important guest, the Advent season is a time for “spiritual housecleaning” to prepare your heart for the coming of Jesus. Our approach during this series—entitled “Behold, I Am Coming Soon”—will be to answer the question, “What would you do to prepare your heart if you knew Jesus was returning on December 25th?”

My prayer for this series is that God will use it to help you to see that your life is short and should be lived in complete devotion to Christ. May the truths you study change the way you experience Christmas this year and in the years to come!

This study guide, designed for individual study or for use in Community Groups, is intended to help us dive deeper into the Scripture and apply the things we learn. The Bible calls us to “be doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22). These study guides are designed to help us not just hear the word on Sunday, but put it into practice Monday through Saturday.

Because the Tomb is Empty,

Luke Simmons
Lead Pastor

The Format

Each study begins with a **key verse** that summarizes the truth found in the entire section. These key verses, if memorized, would allow you to learn the big ideas found in the text. Then there is an **introduction** to the passage that you can use for review or, if you miss a Sunday, you can track with us wherever we are. Next are some questions for **investigation** (getting into the text) and **implication** (applying these truths to daily life). Each study concludes with a section on **other issues**, which expand on any other issues or questions raised by the passage that we may not take time to cover during the sermon.

Suggestions for Individuals

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to see what he is saying in the Bible and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study and write out answers to the questions.
- Resist any temptation to skip over the **implication** section. It is important to ponder how the truths apply to your life. Though these questions are sometimes penetrating and difficult, they are designed to help you think seriously about your life.
- Take what opportunities you can to share with others about what you’ve learned and how you’d like your life to change as a result.

Suggestions for Community Groups

- It is recommended that you study the passage *after* it has been preached. This way you can discuss the issues raised by the sermon as well as the study itself.
- In your time together as a community, focus on the **implications** for your lives individually and as a group. Share with one another how you sense God calling you to change, pray for one another about these things, and invite one another to encourage you and hold you accountable to apply the truth.
- In your time together as a community, use this guide as a launching point for discussion and care for one another. Resist the urge to try to discuss every question or “get through the material.”

Questions or Comments?

If you have feedback or questions about the series or studies, please feel free to email them to info@secondmilechurch.com.

THE HEART BEHIND THE ADVENT SEASON

An Introduction to This Study

The celebration of the season of Advent (which means “coming” or “arrival”) dates back to the fourth century. It is a time that focuses our attention on Jesus Christ’s birth and ministry as well as his Second Coming when he will return to redeem all of creation and rule with all power and authority. Since we can’t anticipate the day or the hour of Christ’s return, we are filled with both a sense of joyful expectation and humble reverence, with our spiritual focus being on lives of prayer and preparation.

Advent’s Spiritual Pilgrimage¹

Over the past centuries the liturgy of the church has developed a spirituality particularly for Christians during Advent. Both the [traditional] Sunday liturgies and the daily Scripture readings have been designed to direct our journey into the Advent experience of the mystery of Christ. Our parents in the faith have chosen Scriptures that accent three Advents: the Advent of Christ *coming into our own lives*, the Advent of Christ’s *physical birth in Bethlehem*, and the Advent of *his second coming at the end of history*. As we prepare to be enriched by the Advent liturgies and our personal daily readings, it will be helpful for us to think about how we should journey through the season.

Meditating on the Second Coming

The spirituality of Advent calls us to start our journey in expectation of the second coming of Christ. The end time is the period in history when the work of Christ will be consummated, when the powers of evil will be put away forever, when the earth will be restored to the golden age described by Isaiah and St. John (see Isa. 65; Rev. 20-22). How is this hope for a future restoration of the world to guide our meditation?

First, the hope of a world restored under God proclaims that evil is not the final word. If we were to read only the newspaper accounts of murder, espionage, violence, wars, and the like, we would have only a negative view of the world. If we were to visit the hospitals with the terminally ill, the psychiatric wards with the mentally deranged, or the prisons filled with lawbreakers, we would see the world only from this view. If we were to spend all our time among the poor, among those

who are starving to death, among those who are oppressed under political or economic systems that dehumanize and depersonalize people, we would have a pessimistic view of the world.

What the second coming says to us is that the evil of this world is doomed. It will be judged and burned by fire because God in Christ has already dealt a decisive blow to the powers of evil. God has dethroned these powers and taken away their ability to have ultimate control over history and over our lives (Col. 2:15).

Next, the second coming says that the ultimate word in history is the triumph of God, the reign of God’s kingdom, the eternal and lasting rule of the good. Here is where our Advent meditation rests. By faith we are promised that evil will be judged and done away with and all will be made whole. This is the vision we want to carry with us as we view the news and visit the hospitals, psychiatric wards, and prisons of our world. Christian hope is an optimism about life that is grounded in Christ and celebrated again and again in the liturgy of the church.

Meditating on the Longing for Christ

Advent spirituality is not a time to meditate on the actual birth of Christ. According to tradition, we ought not to sing Christmas carols until Christmas itself, for Advent is not a time to celebrate the birth of Jesus in the manger but a time to long for the coming of the Savior. The appropriate sense of this season is captured in the pleading of “O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.”

Because Advent is a time of longing for redemption, we should use the Advent season as a period to identify the matters from which we need to be redeemed. Identify whatever it is that seems to be holding you in its power: Take a piece of paper and write at the top, “Powers that hold me in their grip.” Then begin to list everything that you can think of from which you would like to be set free. These powers may be bad habits, undesirable relationships, a job that is stifling and unrewarding, a vice such as a bad temper, jealousy, envy, or dishonesty, or any blockage to living by the spirit of joy, temperance, or generosity. Whatever it may be, commit it to the one who comes to set the prisoners free, turn it over to Christ in prayer, and ask the one who is to come into your life to take this problem up into himself.

There is one more matter that is important in this discipline, however. If you would truly turn this issue over to Christ, the decision must come from the inside—from the heart and the will. You must purpose it. One of our greatest problems is that we make our decisions intellectually without recourse to the deeper side of our personality. Obviously the mind must be engaged in our decisions, but decisions of life that are primarily formed in the mind without the pain of a gut-wrenching longing that results in sleepless nights and moments of deep anxiety are too often dismissed with the wave of the hand or a rationalization that seems intelligent and acceptable. In your prayer, plead and petition the God who is coming in Christ to touch you on the inside and to birth in you an anxious and heavy longing to be redeemed from the power that holds you in its grip. Then and only then will Christ come to be born in your heart.

¹ Excerpted from Webber, Dr. Robert, *Ancient-Future Time*; Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, (c) 2004 Robert E. Webber.

Meditating on the Advent of Christ in Our Lives

In Advent spirituality we are also called on to meditate on the birthing of Christ in our hearts. In this matter we are dealing with the conversion of life, the movement away from the old life lived under the power of evil to the new life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. True conversion is a turning from one way of life to another. Christ calls us to be converted to him, to make him the pattern of our lives, to make our living and dying a living and dying in him. This can only be accomplished as we completely submit to him and live our lives in respect to his paschal mystery and by the example he left for us to follow.

Advent is a time to review once again where our faith is placed and how our lives are lived. Trust in Jesus is not merely a onetime act but a continuous state of being, a moment-by-moment existence in Christ. It is a daily turning from a life lived for self to a life lived in tune with the power of the Spirit who continually calls us to be like Jesus.

Some people who have lived particularly wild lives find the contrast between their old way of life and their new way of life to be dramatic and vivid. This was certainly the experience of St. Paul, whose dramatic conversion resulted in an about-face. But for many the transfer of allegiance to Christ and to the way of life he calls us to emulate is quieter and less discernible. Many of us who have been reared in Christian homes and nurtured in the faith are not able to point with certainty to the precise moment of conversion. Whether we come into the faith through a stormy and cataclysmic experience or were parented into Christ is not the real issue. What is at stake during Advent is an assessment of our current state of faith and living and our commitment to keep on living in the hope to which we have been called.

Advent asks us to deal with the basics of our relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Do I really believe in Christ? Have I put my hope and trust in him? Do I see the future through the eyes of the one who came to redeem the world from the power of evil? Is there a longing within me for him to be formed within, to take up residence in my personal life, in my home, and in my vocation? These are not easy questions to answer. They require meditation, intention, and above all, a commitment that remains steadfast. But if we would break away from a spiritual life growing cold and a Christ who is becoming distant, we must be attentive to our spiritual discipline and long for God to break in on us with new life. When we do this, we experience the true meaning of Advent spirituality.

Week 1

DRAW NEAR TO JESUS

Revelation 3:14-22

.....
Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.

.....
(Revelation 3:20, ESV)
.....

Introduction

Wouldn't you love to be able to see things from God's perspective? Revelation 19:2 says that God's judgments are true and just. In other words, God sees things as they actually are. 1 Samuel 16:7 says, "the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." One of the main reasons we need to be constantly exploring the truth of God's word is because it gives us God's perspective and helps us to see things as he does. After all, "the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12).

In this passage, we discover a church that does not see itself from Jesus' perspective. They think they are fine and have what they need, but Jesus sees them as "wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev 3:17). Jesus sees the great spiritual need that they have, though they are blind to it. Graciously, Jesus sends them a letter to awaken them to their dangerous spiritual condition.

Like this church at Laodicea, we drift far too easily into self-sufficiency and complacency. We need regular reminders and "wake-up calls" that jolt us back into realizing what we should never forget—that we are helpless and hopeless without Christ. Jesus said it this way: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for *apart from me you can do nothing*" (John 15:5).

May this Advent season be a time of admitting your constant need for God's grace. May you draw near to Jesus and experience a vibrant season of friendship with him!

Investigation

Read Revelation 1:9-20 and 3:14-22.

1. A commentator with knowledge of the background of Laodicea writes, "Nearby Hierapolis was famous for its hot springs, and Colosse for its cold, refreshing mountain stream. But Laodicea had dirty, tepid water that flowed for miles through an underground aqueduct. Visitors, unaccustomed to it, immediately spat it out."² With this background in mind, what do you think Jesus means when he calls this church "lukewarm"?
2. Laodicea "was primarily known for 3 industries: banking, wool, and medicine (notably its eye salve)."³ How does this insight help you understand Jesus' call to them in verses 17-18?
3. What is the significance of a person "eating" with Jesus?
4. In your own words, how would you summarize Jesus' invitation to the church at Laodicea?

² John Jr MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville: Word Pub., 1997, c1997). Re 3:16.

³ Ibid.

Implication

1. Many Christians can point to a time in their life when, even though they had previously been aware of their great need for Jesus and experienced the life-giving power of depending on him, they began to drift into self-sufficiency and away from the Lord. What factors cause people to drift from Jesus?
2. Jesus accused the Laodiceans of saying “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” (3:17). Why do circumstances of success, comfort, and prosperity often lead us to forget how desperately we need Jesus?
3. What are some ways that you’ve seen that God’s grace is really more valuable than gold, fine garments, or healing medicine? How has this played out in your life?
4. What are some things *you* do when you are really trying to draw near to Jesus?

Other Issues

Revelation 3:19 calls us to “be zealous and repent.” What is repentance?

Repentance means that you realize that you are a guilty, vile sinner in the presence of God, that you deserve the wrath and punishment of God, that you are hell-bound. It means that you begin to realize that this thing called sin is in you, that you long to get rid of it, and that you turn your back on it in every shape and form. You renounce the world whatever the cost, the world in its mind and outlook as well as its practice, and you deny yourself, and take up the cross and go after Christ.⁴

⁴ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974, 2:248.