

# PROMISE KEEPER

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*JEREMIAH 33:14-17; 1 THESSALONIANS 3:9-13*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

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*NOVEMBER 29, 2015/FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT*

We've arrived at the first Sunday of Advent. I thought it would be appropriate to begin, on this first Sunday of the Christian year, with a few words about the Christian calendar.

Why do we use words like "Advent" and "Lent" and "Epiphany" and "Pentecost?" Many Depending upon your background and your faith journey thus far, you may have often associated these words with some of the "high churches" (Roman Catholics, Anglicans, etc.) Perhaps some of us still aren't entirely sure what the point of the whole Christian calendar really is.

I came across an excellent reflection by Brian Zahnd this week on why a wide variety of Christians are increasingly choosing to observe time in this way.

This is from an article he wrote on his blog, called "Secular or Sacred Time?"

What is time? Time is the measurement of motion through space.

A day is the revolution of the earth.

A month is the revolution of the moon around the earth.

A year is the revolution of the earth around the sun.

But time as such is without any apparent meaning. Just a spinning planet with an orbiting moon orbiting a star...

**To give time meaning we need a story.** Without a story time is pointless and nihilism beckons.

For almost two thousand years the church has had the wisdom and creativity to mark time by the gospel story of Jesus. This is time made sacred. Thus the church calendar.

**Advent** anticipates the coming of Messiah.

**Christmas** celebrates the birth of Jesus.

**Epiphany** remembers the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles.

**Lent** is the solemn journey to the cross.

**Easter** is the celebration of the resurrection.

**Pentecost** marks the birth of the church.

**Ordinary Time** leads us through the year and back to Advent.

How we tell time determines who we are.<sup>1</sup>

I like the way Brian Zahnd puts it. *To give time meaning we need a story. How we tell time determines who we are.*

If the story we tell about time leans heavily on words like “Black Friday” or “Boxing Day” or “Valentine’s Day” or any of the other days that are driven by the calendar of consumerism, then this says a lot about who we are and what we value.

Doesn’t it?

If the story we tell about time uses a lot of phrases like “long weekend” or “TGIF” or “I need a vacation”—if how we understand and speak about time seems mainly oriented around work and when we get to stop doing it—well, then this, too, says a lot about who we are and what we value.

Doesn’t it?

**Keeping time with *Jesus* helps us to arrange and understand our lives not by the dictates of a marketing culture oriented around consumption, recreation, and entertainment, but on the story of God and God’s action in the world.**

So, this is why I, like many others, have come to appreciate the Christian calendar, even if a bit later in my journey than others.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://brianzahnd.com/2015/11/secular-or-sacred-time/>

Advent gets it all started. We begin in the darkest time of the year, but Advent sets us out on the path to light.

The theme of the Advent worship resources that we are using this year is “Freedom Bound.” Here’s what the writer Ken Beidler says:

We live in the paradox that we are both bound and free, on a march to freedom but encumbered by the burden and sin we carry; we are carrying the scars of struggle but living with a new hope. God’s freedom takes us down pathways of justice, mercy, trust, love, service and inclusion.

The display at the front gives us a visual of this paradox.

The chains remind us that we all still carry “the scars and struggle.” The light of the candles points toward hope and freedom.

Next Sunday and each Sunday before Christmas, we will remove a portion of these chains during the opening candle lighting to symbolize the freedom that Christ brings to us and to the world.

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I’ve spoken in past sermons about the chalkboard in the bathroom at the Penny Coffee House.

They have turned an entire wall into a giant message board. There is chalk provided along with an open invitation, it seems, to write whatever you want on the wall before or after the business at hand.

On Thursday, this is the image I encountered (*PowerPoint*).

What do you see in there?

GOD IS LOVE

You see, below, someone has written, “love is good.” You see an exhortation not to belittle others beliefs (because that isn’t loving).

You see the word “love” crossed out and replaced with the word “pretend.” And, the word “pretend” crossed out and replaced by a picture of a light bulb.

But what really caught my eye on the chalkboard at the Penny Coffee House on Thursday was what someone had written to the top left (in red).

***Which god? There are so many?***

Interesting question.

I found myself wondering what the person who wrote that was thinking about when they wrote that on the board.

Was it a statement about religious pluralism? Was the person asking, which, of all the religious options out there, is true?

Or, maybe they were thinking about the ancient world and its many gods – the gods of Greek mythology, of Mesopotamia and Assyria, the gods of the nations that surrounded Israel...

Or maybe they were thinking about the gods that we moderns find more attractive.

The god of money, perhaps, or of military might? Or the gods of entertainment and technology? Or, most popular of all, the god of *me*?

There has never been a short supply of gods on offer throughout human history.

For Christians, the seasons of Advent/Christmas (incarnation) and, perhaps even more importantly, Lent/Easter (crucifixion and resurrection), are the answer to the question: “Which god?”

We see this reflected in the first of our texts.

To weary exiles, Jeremiah offers a word of hope. And the word of hope is grounded in the *specificity* of their God, and of their God’s faithfulness.

Your God is a promise keeper, Jeremiah says. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is faithful. Things look bleak here in exile. *But the days are coming when God's promise will be fulfilled...*

Jeremiah speaks of a "Righteous Branch from David's line." One who will bring health, healing, peace, and security to his people.

One who will "do what is just and right in the land."

Jeremiah's prophecy anchors us in the story of a particular people, a particular God, and a particular hope.

Which god?

Whether the question is asked on bathroom chalkboards or, more often, in every day lives that wait and wonder and hope and long for freedom, justice, truth—and I believe that *every* human life longs for these things, no matter the confused ways in which this longing finds expression—Advent points us toward an answer.

*This* God, Jeremiah says.

The promise-keeper.

The God who loves his people and his creation too much to abandon it.

The God who will be fully revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, the "Righteous Branch who will show the world what love looks like, who will open and expand the boundaries of "the people of God," welcoming in the outsider, the God who heals, forgives, liberates, and sets us on the path to freedom.

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So, Jeremiah points us toward an answer to the "which god?" question.

In our text from 1 Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul reminds us that how we answer the "which god?" question has everything to do with how we approach the "which vision of humanity?" question.

Advent, like Lent, is a season of preparation—preparation for the coming of God in human flesh, once again.

**It reminds us that God’s coming to be with us is meant to lead to us coming, increasingly, to be with God.**

Advent is not a kindly, divine pat on the back that says, “Don’t worry, things look bleak, but everything’s going to be all right!” At least it’s not *just* this.

Advent also calls us to be a people fit for God’s coming.

Listen to what Paul says.

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.

And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

There is something gloriously true about the fact that God comes to his world and to his people as they are, *before* we get our act together, before we get cleaned up.

Advent is about the invasion of God with the vaccine for a sin-sick world. Advent is about God cracking open the door, cutting the chains, and dragging us toward freedom.

This is something that we can never do for ourselves.

But for those of us who keep time with Jesus, year after year, those of us who order *our* stories by *this* story, it is *also* true that we are called to be a people who are prepared for his coming anew each year in anticipation of his glorious coming again.

How do we prepare?

*We are to increase and abound in love for one another... (3:12).*

And, just in case we are tempted to think that our obligations to love end with the church, Paul adds, “and for all” at the end.

**Advent-ready people are people who are *always* seeing to increase and abound in love *to all* in response to the God whose very being and identity is love, the God whose movement toward his people in the Incarnation is motivated *by* love.**

This is what “holy” and “blameless” lives look like (3:13). This is what hearts who are prepared to received their king look like.

As we take our first steps of this Advent season, may our instinct when faced with the “which god?” question always be to point to Jesus, God-in-flesh, God-with-us, the fulfillment of God’s promise to bring justice, peace, hope, and freedom from all that keeps us bound.

And may our response to *this* God always be to abound and increase in love. For all.

Amen.

