

“What Child Is This?”

Why do we need Advent? Why can't we just start singing Christmas carols and telling Christmas stories, say, in September, or whenever the Hallmark channel starts their Christmas movies?



Why do we need Advent in our calendar? Because we need to remember those times when we experienced hopes realized, love embraced us, joy overtook despair, peace replaced anger.

We need advent because we know, if we look at any 15 minutes of news, that these promises of Advent seem to be distant and in short supply. As John Calvin puts it, “Sorrow would choke our hearts were we not taught to believe from the experience of the past.”

We need Advent because we so easily forget the answer to the question ask today:

‘What Child Is This?’

“...whom angels greet with anthems sweet/while shepherds watch are keeping.”

Why do the angels greet this child? Because this Child is the proof that:

“You, LORD, showed favor to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.” (Psalm 85:1)

Psalm 85 was a remembrance for the Israelites of how God had brought them from a land of slavery to a land that held great promise for them. And yet, because of their sin, the land was still not what they had hoped it would be.

In this time of uncertainty about our present and our future, it is good to look back, to remember, in Scripture and in your own lives those times when God showed favor to you, when God restored your fortunes.

But we do not hope for the future based on remembrances alone. We need to know that God will do it again, that the Child in the manger,

“...the end of fear for all who hear/The silent child is speaking.”

Yes, this child, though an infant holy and lowly, is still speaking that our fear is overcome in his life, for indeed in this Child ‘the hopes and fears of all the years are met.’ So the Psalmist continues:

“Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?
Show us your unfailing love, LORD, and grant us your salvation.”

How can he accomplish this, this baby born in Bethlehem?

“What child is this?

“...the king of kings salvation brings/Let loving hearts enthrone him.”

He is the king of kings. In his hands and his feet, destined to be scarred and nailed to a cross, he brings salvation. It falls to us to decide to enthrone him, to sing, with the hymn, ‘Come to my heart Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for thee.’

How do we enthrone him? We follow the model of the people gathered to worship in the Psalm. We say in our hearts:

“I will listen to what God the LORD says.”

That means being quiet. It means being silent and patient and putting aside distractions of screens and in silence to listen for the word: “peace.” Turn toward the Child rather than turn toward folly in these Advent days and you will hear the word we all desire: peace.

“Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.”

God’s deepest desire to dwell with his people. God created a tabernacle to be with the Israelites, which became a Temple in Jerusalem, which for us became

the child in the manger. Then glory dwelt in our land, and our ancestors in the faith, they behold his glory, face to face.

What did they see in this child? They saw love and faithfulness met together, righteousness and peace kiss each other.

In this Child are embodied these qualities which are our source of true happiness. Loving-kindness which embraces us; enduring faithfulness, finding us no matter how far we sink into doubt and despair; righteousness, the source of our being made right with God despite our record of sin; and peace, *shalom*, the sense that all really is right with the world.

Calvin asks the question we ask today, “When cruelty rages, when truth is extinguished, when righteousness is trampled under foot, when everything is embroiled in confusion, would it not be better for the world to end than such a state of affairs continue?” No, Calvin concludes, because when this Child reigns, “There will be no corner of the earth where these qualities (which represent all the qualities of true happiness) do not flourish.”

This is our call, to allow love and faithfulness to meet in our walks, for righteousness and peace to inform our conversations and actions.

Jesus represents the springing forth of faithfulness from the earth. Jesus, in our behalf, reaches up, even as a child, to receive the holy stare of the angels, of righteousness looking down from heaven, their eyes full of wonder at the sight of this child, full of grace and truth.

A well-known commentator puts it this way, echoing Augustine:

“Heaven and earth meet ...just as the sun shines down from the Sky and draws forth new budding life from the earth, so the righteousness of God ...evokes the faithfulness and the faith of men. God bows down from heaven to earth , and the earth reaches up toward heaven, towards God, a vision whose grandeur and profundity are equally sublime.”

The salvation which this Child brings is not just that of our spirits, but it is of our bodies as well, of our deepest physical and emotional needs. The Psalmist anticipates this:

“The LORD will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.” (v.12)

This is our hope. That God so loves the land, the animals, the forests, the rivers, the people, the orphans, the widows, the sick and the dying, that God will give us what is good. We will again, as Advent 2020 becomes the 12 days of Christmas which finally usher in 2021, we will again see the land yielding peace.

“Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.” (v. 13)

There is our call. To follow in the steps of Jesus, following righteousness in this land. Then, as we follow, others will follow us in a transformational pilgrimage to Bethlehem, where we will meet this Child:

“This, this is Christ the king...The babe, the son of Mary.”

This is why we need Advent, to remember that Christ is the king who comes to us, then and now, at once king and baby. And because both of those facts are gospel truth, we can know salvation.

What needs to happen for us to find a way to live with, speak with, and once again play with our neighbors? The deep divisions caused by differing attitudes and opinions about COVID and the presidential election do not need to create a permanent wound in our land.

You have a choice to make this Advent: you can dwell in anger or despair or derision toward your ‘opponents’; or you can choose to become the one who prepares a new way for the steps of the Child into your family, your friendships, your coffee klatches, your workplace break rooms, all the places where you can introduce everyone you meet to your Savior, this Christ Child who is for the them the source of the world’s only true hope, love, joy and peace.