

Advent MMXXI Series Discussion Guides December 2021

Week 1 - A Longing Deferred; An Invitation to Hope



LONGING DEFERRED: An Invitation to Hope

Teaching Text

Luke 1: 39-45

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!"

Recap

This past Sunday, Pastor Olivia kicked off our Advent sermon series with a message on deferred longing. When Jesus was on earth, He often asked people what they wanted from Him. He knows that desires lurk within us, both pure and impure, and that it is much safer to open up these desires in His presence. Once we acknowledge these longings, we are inevitably led into the reality of waiting for these longings to be fulfilled.

In Luke 1, Elizabeth and Zechariah, an elderly couple, long for a child and yet do not let their hearts grow bitter in the waiting. In the same way, we should not be willing to sin to get what

we want or if it takes too long. We must ask ourselves if God is still trustworthy and good, even if our longings are never met.

When Elizabeth is finally pregnant with John the Baptist and Mary comes over with news of the birth of Jesus, Elizabeth immediately knows Mary's baby is the Messiah and blesses her. Elizabeth is not threatened by Mary's favor, but instead exemplifies faith triumphing over personal ambition. Her son later models this same humility when John gladly points his followers to Jesus as the true King. It is significant that Elizabeth's longing was for John, and John ultimately pointed the way to Jesus.

Discussion Guide

Connect

1. What is your guilty pleasure Christmas song?

Contemplate

Ask someone (or multiple people) to read Luke 1:39-45 out loud. Then, discuss at least one of the following questions:

1. What words, images, or phrases stood out to you?
2. What can we learn from Elizabeth's reaction to Mary's news?
3. Who is an "Elizabeth" in your own life?

Consider

1. If Jesus were to ask you "What can I do for you?" today, what would your truest answer be?
2. Practically, what does it look like to wait for God as we live in between our longing and its fulfillment?
3. Elizabeth and other disciples who came before us are part of the "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12) who cheer us on as we run after God, even in the midst of unmet longings. Who comes to mind for you when you picture the "cloud of witnesses"?

Cover

Ask your group to sit with the following questions for a few minutes. After spending time in reflection, pray as a group over whatever the Spirit arose in your hearts and minds.

- What do I really want? Is it okay for me to long?
- Will I be holy in the waiting?
- What will happen to my faith if I'm disappointed?
- Am I really ready for my prayers to be answered?
- How will I react when someone else is favored by God?

Week 2 - A Longing Contested; An Invitation to Peace

LONGING CONTESTED:

An Invitation to Peace

Teaching Text

Matthew 1:18-25

*This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: **23** "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.*

Matthew 2:13-18

When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with

the time he had learned from the Magi. Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

*“A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”*

Recap

This past Sunday, Pastor Jon continued our Advent series by examining the story of Joseph and what he teaches us about embracing a spirit of peace in contested spaces. Pastor Jon explained that peace that relies on perfect circumstances is actually no peace at all. Instead, Joseph's life shows us that true peace is a disruptive force, flipping our desired security and success on their heads. As the Gospel makes its way through our lives, it awakens us to the reality of spiritual resistance in the world and in our own circumstances. We see that true peace is also anti-fragile, becoming stronger and more potent every time it comes under pressure. As true peace invades our lives, we discover that it is found in both the miraculous and the ordinary. This is how God often moves, within moments of divine breakthrough, and mundane, everyday faithfulness. This encourages us to set our expectations before God without an agenda, building a balanced and holistic joy in our hearts. Lastly, Joseph's story reminds us that true peace comes through obedience that is often costly. Joseph's relationship with Mary probably cost him credibility and connivance in his community, but all we see from him is obedience to what the Lord asks of him; we never even hear him speak.

Pastor Jon exhorted us with the truth that it is often the small seeds of obedience, not the spectacular moments, that move the kingdom forward. To persevere with obedience in this world, we must expand our “horizon of significance” by measuring our lives by God's endless ability to move through us. We can invite the peace of God into our hearts by embracing the conflict and controversy that comes our way, be open to divine disruption, and rejoicing in our certain hope that God is on the move and cannot be stopped.

Discussion Guide

This week, Groups will spend time together in Silent Prayer. Here's how to frame, structure, and guide this time for your Group:

Part 1- Framing: It will be important for you to frame this time of silent prayer for your Group. A few things to highlight are (1) encourage them to ask God to lead them; (2) have them pick a word or a phrase to recenter their thoughts when they wander like "The Lord is my shepherd" or even the name Jesus; (3) explain that silent prayer is different than intercession, it's just enjoying God's company and listening for His voice. They might not do much of the "talking" in prayer, they can primarily listen.

Part 2 - Intention Setting: Invite everyone to pair up in groups of 2 or 3 to set an intention for the time. This is basically just how they want God to meet them. Give them 5-10 mins to think and share.

Part 3 - Silence: The encouragement is to give your Group no materials (not even a Bible) and no stimulus (no music) and just give them time to be with God. Set aside 30-60 minutes for this.

Part 4 - Debrief. Circle everyone back up and ask them these questions: (1) What was that experience like for you? (2) How did God meet you? You can have them share their answers back in their groups that they set intentions with, with the whole group, or both.

CHURCH OF THE CITY ^{NY}

Week 3 - The Curiosity of Christmas; Longing Fulfilled

THE CURIOSITY OF CHRISTMAS

Longing Fulfilled

Teaching Text

Matthew 2:1-12

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." When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 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. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "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.'" Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 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." 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. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 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. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Recap

This past Sunday, Pastor Jon explored the curiosity Christmas stirs up in the human heart through the story of the Wise Men in Matthew's gospel. In their journey we see the

importance of humbly seeking answers beyond ourselves and actively evaluating and deciding what is worth our whole life devotion.

The Magi teach us that when we encounter both external and internal angst, we must resolve to seek an answer for it instead of numbing or ignoring it. In a time of great socio-political discord, the Wise Men, who were highly revered as experts in the spiritual realm, humbled themselves and sought answers outside of their own understandings. During the Babylonian exile, generations before Jesus' birth, the prophet Daniel gained favor with the Wise Men of his time because of his God-given gift to interpret dreams. Daniel's influence allowed whispers of the prophecies surrounding Israel's Messiah to be woven into the traditions of the Magi, and ultimately led these three men on an intentional journey towards something greater than themselves. Upon discovering Jesus, the Magi immediately fell to the ground in worship, honoring Him with gold for His royalty, frankincense for his divinity, and myrrh for His humanity.

Encountering Jesus demands a response from us, and Pastor Jon explained three different responses of the human heart. Hostility, like Herod the Great, that seeks to remove Jesus from the equation, because He is an active threat to the kingdom of ego. Apathy, that traps people in a lukewarm existence that will never satisfy. And finally worship, like the Wise Men, who experienced exceeding great joy as they recognized through eyes of faith that the baby Jesus would one day be crowned the King of Kings, and fulfill every prophecy, promise, and longing.

Discussion Guide

Connect

What is the most memorable gift you have received at Christmas time?

Contemplate

Ask someone (or multiple people) to read the teaching text out loud:

- Matthew 2:1-12

Then, discuss at least one of the following questions:

1. What words, images, or phrases stood out to you?
2. What encourages you or challenges you about the Wise Men's journey to find Jesus?

Consider

1. When you feel the angst for answers Pastor Jon described, what is your natural response — to numb/ignore or to seek? Do you think you lean more towards one or the other?
2. Is there an area, or areas, in your life that you had to humble yourself to receive Jesus?

3. Pastor Jon described having faith in Jesus as both intellectually credible and existentially satisfying. When is a time you have experienced this kind of exceeding great joy in your faith journey?

Cover

Take time and ask God to:

- reveal where angst might be building up in your heart
- where you might need to humble yourself and seek His wisdom
- remind you that He is worthy of giving all of yourself

CHURCH OF THE CITY NY

Week 4 - Lessons & Carols

LESSONS & CAROLS

Teaching Text

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said:

*“My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
just as he promised our ancestors.”*

Recap

Based deeply in church tradition, our yearly Lessons & Carols service allows us to come together to tell the Christmas story and sing the joyful hymns of the season. This Advent Season, we have been exploring Christmas through different characters in the story of Jesus' birth, and this week, Pastor Suzy took a closer look at Mary in her sermonette for Lessons & Carols. Through Mary, we see a beautiful picture of what happens when the deep longings of both a people, and an individual, are fulfilled. The core longing of each person is to be loved, and at the end of the day, the Christmas story is a love story.

Israel had been suffering under oppression and injustice for generations, and are longing to be healed, drawn back into the loving embrace of their God. The Lord had not only promised to heal them, but that He Himself would come be their Healer. The God of the Universe stepped down from His heavenly throne to become a child, allowing perfect love to be embodied and dwell among His people. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary to tell her that she is about to become the mother of the Son of God, this love incarnate, she bursts into poetic worship. She understands that she will be carrying the fulfillment of the prophecies and longings of both the hearts of her people, and her own heart, in her womb.

Mary recognizes that this is God coming to make everything right, to keep His promises, and to bring justice and mercy to His people. She responds in obedience, calling herself the Lord's servant, and in turn is invited to participate in the best love story ever told, not because she was strong or wise or wealthy, but because she was faithful to God. Eventually, Mary gets to stand in time as a witness. She would watch Jesus, her Messiah, live a perfect life, meet death on a cross, and rise from the dead; love conquering death, casting out all fear.

We share Mary's call this Christmas Season. We must first recognize that our longings are fulfilled in the person of Jesus, who is love embodied, and desires to love us. Then we must respond by giving ourselves back to Him, inviting Him in as He draws near to us with joy and worship. After this, we are invited to participate by being Jesus' hands and feet, proclaiming with our lives that His love has come into the world. Finally, this allows us to witness God's love moving in our own lives and in the lives of others, enabling us to share the Good News of the Gospel, and the truth that the Lover who created us desires to be in a restorative relationship with us.