

SLIDE 1: A New Advent

Who Are We?

Sunday November 27, 2022

Here we are – ADVENT. A time of anticipation and hope – of looking back and - looking forward.

Looking *back* to the birth of Jesus Christ – to the incarnation of God amidst His creation – to His “coming.”

Looking *forward* to the return of Jesus Christ – to that time when He will bring final and fair justice and make all things new – to His “coming back.”

It is - then - as Pastor Darrel recently shared with me – a protracted time – there is Advent – this season - and – then there is “Adventing” – which is to say – all the Advent seasons to come until Christ comes back.

Until that time - we will wait with anticipation and hope for the return of Jesus – the One whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

I love Christmastime.

I love that it marks our calendars – the whole year built around and ending with the celebration of God’s incarnation.

I love that we celebrate it every year – like a reminder of something that is - so important – that it has long-deserved its own day of remembering.

I love that the birthday of Jesus is a holiday for everyone – like a backdoor sabbath for those who don’t even know Him – and a day of rejoicing for those who do.

I love that the name of Jesus is in the air – sung about and talked about – on social media – on cable – on radio – in churches - in movies – in our grocery stores – Christmas carols as anthems.

And I love the traditions.

I love the advent calendars and wreaths and candles and nativity scenes and trees. And I sure don’t mind giving and getting gifts!

I love that we have calendars that walk us through the journey to the manger – one day at a time – from Dec. 1-25. We have one that was given to us years ago by my dad and his wife. It is a treasure: a large board book that opens into a library of mini books which tell the story of Jesus’ birth.

I love the advent wreath – lit as it is – to remind us that – *In Jesus was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it* (Jn. 1:4-5).

Here's a cool origin story: the advent wreath (as far as we know) first appeared in Germany in 1839. A Lutheran minister – working at a mission for children – made a wreath out of the wheel of a cart. What!

Sounds a bit like a redneck wreath!

He placed 20 small red candles and 4 large white candles inside the ring: the 20 red candles were lit on the weekdays – and the 4 white candles were lit on Sundays.

Eventually – the advent wreath was made from evergreens – symbolizing – like the Christmas tree – everlasting life and light – in the midst of the darkness of winter.

I love nativity scenes – even if some of them are theologically wonky.

I love that these scenes we set focus on the Christ-child and his parents – and dirty, barnyard animals as witnesses. We have a couple of nativity scenes – one from my dad and his wife – and one from our son, Joshua.

Pulling all these tradition-symbols out of storage every year jump starts my Christmas anticipation and hope.

As does the story of the birth of Jesus - as told in Luke 2. Turn with me to that gospel and that chapter, if you would, where we will begin – and end - our Advent series.

SLIDE 2. We will be reading vv. 1-7...

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria). And everyone went to his own town to register (vv. 1-3).

Everyone – including the child-expecting teenager (Lk. 1:30-33), Mary and her somewhat older fiancée, Joseph (Lk. 1:26-27).

Everyone went to their own town – probably meaning – to the town of their ancestral origin. Which is a big deal as it relates to Joseph – as we'll see in a moment.

So, Caesar Augustus ordered a census of the Roman Empire – a counting of the people – for taxes and military conscription (though the Jews were exempted from the latter).

This is Luke's way of establishing a time frame for Jesus' birth – based on the politicians and the political events – "in those days."

Off they would go – then – Joseph and Mary – on what would have been a 4-day-trip – at least - on foot – or as some have speculated – for Mary – on a donkey – which was a common mode of transportation for the poor at the time.

Let's just stop there for a second – and imagine...

Esp. – if you're a new mom :)

The distance between Nazareth and Bethlehem is roughly 130 kms.

That would mean that Joseph and Mary – travelling 8 hours/day – through the wilderness - at an average speed of 4 km/h – with portioned food and water – and no highway-side gas bars or hotels or google maps or entertainment technologies - would have taken 4 days to get to Bethlehem – “Are we there yet?!”

To do what? To register – to pay taxes to an occupying empire!

This was no fun road trip to a desired destination before having a baby together. This was a mean marathon to make sure the tax man got his portion!

Which, I’m sure, did nothing motivational to ease the challenges of travel or the pain of childbirth!

So, Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary (who also belonged to the house and line of David – though this is not mentioned here), who was pledged to be married to him (vv. 4-5).

What does this tell us about Joseph and Mary?

It tells us a lot: that they were resilient and in shape, that they obeyed the authorities of their day, but most importantly - that the child they would have would also be of the ancestral house and line of King David.

And why is that a big deal?

Because the Messiah – the Savior of the world – from sin and death – is prophesied - in the O.T. - in 2 Sam. 7, Isa. 11, and Jeremiah 23 - to come from the house and line of King David.

The N.T. makes it clear that this Messiah – this Savior - is Jesus – the Holy-Spirit-conceived offspring of Mary and Joseph.

It does so through the gospel genealogies of Matthew and Luke, when - later in Luke 2 - Jesus is announced as Christ the Lord, by the way people greeted Him with the title “Son of David,” and for the work Jesus did on the cross to conquer sin and when He rose from the grave to defeat death – which we celebrate at Easter!

And what do these 2 verses tell us about God?

That He would use the decree of a pagan emperor – someone who would be opposed to God - to fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2 – which says: “*But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times.*”

Namely – Jesus.

God would not be deterred. Nor would Joseph and Mary.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (vv. 6-7).

While they were there... so sometime during their time in Nazareth – not necessarily (and not likely) the night of their arrival... they had a baby boy.

Such understatement for such a significant happening!

We prep. baby rooms. We have baby showers. We have gender-reveal parties. We have doulas and midwives and nurses and doctors involved.

As far as we know – Joseph and Mary were alone: no family, no friends, no room.

They were completely separated from all their family and supporting friends, who lived back in Nazareth. This was hard and lonely.

She wrapped him in cloths...

Having given birth – *she* swaddled her son – which early Christian theologians took to mean that she didn't suffer any labor pain.

Hard to know! Maybe even harder to imagine!

She wrapped him in cloths – not a sterilized hospital birth blanket – but torn strips of cloth wrapped around Jesus. Like strips of cloth for a burial?

...and she placed him in a trough for feeding animals.

Who were these young people?!

We are starting our Advent teaching series today – which we are calling – A New Advent.

We – because Pastor Darrel and I will share the teaching load over the next 4 Sundays.

And - *new* – because – we are wondering what “new things” are coming – what we are “Adventing” for *South Langley Church* in the new year.

SLIDE 3. We'll do that by working our way through Luke 2 – and by sitting with the characters within the chapter to ask these questions and imagine some answers together:

- 1. Who are we?**
- 2. Who are we called to be?**
- 3. How do we get there?**
- 4. What's my role?**
- 5. What will be our values?**

Let's begin. *Who are we?*

We are *South Langley Church* – born as a children's outreach ministry of East Aldergrove Mennonite Brethren Church (now Ross Road Community Church).

In other words - *South Langley Church* began as an outreach to children!

In 1959, this group purchased an acre of land in Brookwood, and in 1964 they began holding church services with 17 charter members – 3 of whom are with us to this day!

That small congregation quickly outgrew its premises in Brookwood. That outreach attracted families from the South Langley community and, despite concerns over the sparsely populated area, they bought a 2-acre parcel of land in Fernridge.

Gutsy move!

On Nov. 18, 1979 – a dedication service was held for the new building – which is located – right here!

Sonshine Street Preschool was added in 1986, the kitchen and gym were enlarged in 1992, and a massive 2-storey renovation took place in 2010 – with the intention of making this space as available as possible to our community.

South Langley Church has helped plant 2 daughter churches – Peace Arch Fellowship (now Gracepoint Church) and North Langley Community Church in Walnut Grove (which has planted Jericho Ridge, and the satellite campuses of Aldergove NLCC and Yorkson NLCC) – sort of like our grandchildren :)

South Langley Church has disciplined hundreds and hundreds of children, youth, men, women, and seniors over the past 58 years.

Indeed – we celebrated our 58th Anniversary this last week – on Tuesday November 22. HAPPY BIRTHDAY *South Langley Church!*

South Langley Church has developed dozens and dozens of leaders who have gone out as missionaries, pastors, and leaders in other ministries.

South Langley Church has been the place where so many have been married and so many have been remembered.

South Langley Church has been a place where countless friendships have been formed.

It is good to look back – and to be thankful for what God has given us and for what God has done with us. It is a way to remember His faithfulness to us.

And yet it is not good to stay there. God does not call us to the past. He calls us to the present and to the future.

So – like a swing – it’s good to lean backward – but only to help us go forward. Maybe even to launching ourselves off the swing into the air to a solid two-point landing!

Who are we?

What would a census say about us? Because the TAX MAN is everywhere!

Well – it is not an official counting – but Pastor Darrel – a.k.a. Pastor Detail – updated our people numbers recently. He suggests that we are a church community of roughly 220 people.

Here’s the rough breakdown:

SLIDE 4. SLC by Age Groupings

Ages 0-19 = 37 = 16%

Ages 20-39 = 41 = 18%

Ages 40-59 = 34 = 15%

Ages 60-79 = 80 = 45%

Ages 80+ = 12 = 5%

So, we are a multi-generational group of about 220 people. We have children, youth, young and old adults, and seniors – among us – not to mention a few service dogs!

And - we are currently experiencing our own baby boom!

We own a fantastic building and property. We are remotely located - but growth is on the horizon – with new multiple unit developments and single homes soon being added to the area.

We have *Sonshine Street Preschool* (and Daycare!) – with waiting lists. We have new and young moms meeting weekly to talk life and parenting at MOMS + TOTS.

We have church and community YOUTH meeting on Friday nights to connect, build friendships, and talk about Jesus.

We have WOMEN meeting to hear testimony and to learn how to share their own – like they will at the Christmas Jazz Café.

We have PRIME TIMERS meeting on Tuesdays for coffee and fun and bible study.

We have SWOP – those who serve with a purpose – making quilts and stools and toys.

We have PICKELBALL! We sweat. We laugh. We compete. And we make questionable line calls!

We have team after team giving their time and talent on Council and Committees and Clean-up Crews.

We have met for worship more than 3000 X over 58 years! Think about that: 3000X!
And we have fantastic spiritual DNA as a church...

South Langley Church began as an outreach to children. We showed trust and guts – what some might call – risk-taking-faith - to purchase this property and develop it as we have. The 2010 renovation was designed to offer the God-given gift of our church space as a gift for our community to use. We have been leader-developers and church-planters. What are we dreaming about these days?

This said – we do – like Joseph and Mary – have some challenges.

By our own admission – we have become inward looking. We have shifted from a church with vision to a church that manages. Our mission, vision, and values have become unclear.

By our own admission – we are aging and tired and wondering when our young people will step up and lead. And yet somehow the leadership baton has not been successfully handed off to them.

By our own admission – governance and how we make decisions – has become unclear.

By our own admission – we have been a program church – maybe even to the neglect of developing a personal Great Commandment and Great Commission lifestyle.

By our own admission – we have too often not been kind or gracious with each other when it has come to different understandings of Scripture.

By our own admission – volunteerism is way down – so that we might have to do less – to do the main things well.

But unlike Joseph and Mary – we are not facing these challenges alone.
We have each other. We have been listening to each other.

And we have been listening to our Father in heaven – esp. as we've gathered for prayer the past 8 Wednesday evenings.

We will need to face these challenges together to learn from them and to keep ourselves from making the same kinds of mistakes that have us here – as we are.

It's as Bruce Cockburn says in his song, "Lovers in a Dangerous Time" – "Nothing worth having comes without some kind of fight."

Not very anabaptist – but you get the point!

And *South Langley Church* is worth fighting for!

Because the community around us deserves it.

So... *Who are we?*

Are we people who will do what we've always done and expect different results?

Will our enduring anthem be, "That's the way we've always done it!"

Are we those who will resist change or try something(s) – and see how they go?!

Are we as "permission giving" as we think we are?

Are we ready for another season of adventure – of reaching out, like we once did, to children and families in our community?

And then – who am I – and how do I fit into who are we?

What gifts do I have?

What have I been praying about?

What dreams do I have?

This Advent season – we will journey with the characters of Luke 2 – we will Advent towards Christmas Eve – but we will also Advent – as a church – towards 2023 – asking questions of ourselves – with anticipation and hope.

Thanks for joining Pastor Darrel and I on the journey.

Next Sunday – he will talk about who we are called to be :)