

# God's Promise of Redemption

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The First Sunday of Advent | 1 December 2024

## Readings

Jeremiah 33:14–16; Psalm 25:1–9; 1 Thessalonians 3:9–13; Luke 21:25–36

## The Advent of God's Promise

In today's lessons, especially Jeremiah and Luke, we hear God's promise of redemption stated clearly. Humanity and all of creation shall be redeemed and, says Jesus, this promise is being fulfilled before our very eyes. The question of exactly what redemption is and how God might accomplish this has occupied a lot of Christian discussion and thought since the Ascension about 2,000 years ago.

This idea of completed redemption is often tied up with ideas of the Last Day. That is, the day when Christ returns and the kingdom of God is fully present on earth. The Day of Judgement spoken of by prophets and psalmists for thousands of years. These ideas often get the most press during Advent. This season has many traditions and even more associations. One of the most persistent associations of Advent is that of waiting. Even the name of the season means "to come" in the sense of something coming this way. Advent's waiting is peculiar because we are waiting twice at the same time: Once for our annual remembrance of the first coming of Christ to humanity and once for the second coming, the return of that Christ. In both cases we are looking for the Last Day, because Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise of redemption.

## The Advent Quartets

Humans are fond of grouping ideas and things together. It helps us order our thinking and make sense of whatever is before us. So, when we think of God's redemption in Advent, we tend create groups of ideas to help us. Today, the most commonly seen "themes" of Advent are quite pleasant: Hope, peace, joy and love. Through the Middle Ages and until quite recently, there was a very different quartet of themes for Advent called the Four Last Things: Heaven, Hell, death, and judgement. Both of these sets of themes are entirely appropriate in Advent, especially as we think about God's promise of redemption. The newer set has certainly been more palatable to congregations for the last few generations, though there is a growing renewal of interest in the older set.

Hope, peace, joy, and love are certainly part of the eternity with God that we all anticipate, but so are these ideas about where that eternity is and how death and judgement fit into that process. There is some scary stuff in there—very few of us are entirely comfortable imagining judgement at the hands of an all-knowing God—but this is not completely inappropriate. After all, God's promise of redemption is not that we will go to heaven, it is that heaven will come to earth. All that is good in creation will be exalted and all that is broken or has lost its way shall be restored. I can't speak for you, but I find the idea of God's eternal kingdom made fully present here somehow

more disconcerting than a place far away that I will one day travel to. And this, I think, is important to how we understand the waiting in Advent.

## **Trash or Treasure?**

The idea of our eternal home in a heaven far, far away makes it easy to conceive of this world as temporary. A sort of practice run for the real event in the future. The idea that this world, in its redeemed state, will be our heaven suddenly casts things in a different light. If this is where we and our ancestors and those who follow us will be for eternity, then we need to think differently about how we relate to the rest of creation. With thanks to Sam Wells for this turn of phrase, we can see this world as a problem in need of fixing with God or we can see it as a playground to explore and enjoy with God.

Advent encourages us to take the latter approach and see this world as one worth exploring in all of its depth. After all, if redemption is heaven approaching us, then eternity is not simply an endless version of this life, it is the deepest possible version of this life. Advent is an opportunity to set aside the shallow distractions which surround us on every side and to begin exploring our depths. To sit with hope, peace, joy, and love and, in exploring them, come face to face with our fears, anxieties, despair, and even the hates we carry with us. When we encounter what is good, we can celebrate and exalt it. When we encounter what is broken or see the places where we have lost our way, we can give thanks that God will repair and correct, making even the most damaged parts of us worthy of standing in his presence.

## **God's Perfect Freedom**

God's promise of redemption is one that acknowledges the current messiness of the world and offers the hope of redemption for all things. God promises to do this work, moving all of creation toward its intended end. God's promise frees us to plumb the depths of this life, setting aside distractions and discovering what it really is to be good and very good, made in the image and likeness of God. We can contemplate hope, peace, joy, love, heaven, hell, death, and judgement as part of our redemption because we have seen them all bound up together in Jesus Christ. We are free to begin experiencing eternity here and now, to explore this divine playground, because the work of redemption, impossible for us to accomplish alone, is in God's hands. Truly, salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Romans 13:11