

Welcome and Reminders

Welcome to any visitors and welcome back to the group members. It is important to remember that everything said and done in this group is confidential. The expectation is that there will not be discussion about our conversations to anyone outside of the group that is represented here and now. We understand that sometimes personal insights or information may be shared by someone who feels comfortable doing so in this group and not around others. Let's be respectful of that and carry our commitment to confidentiality as we leave this group. *(Pass out the confidentiality reminder to anyone who has not yet received one).*

Prayer and Praises

Recapping Advent

In our last session we introduced the season of Advent. Many of us come from churches who celebrated Advent each year while others did not even mention Advent. For some it is a tradition fondly remembered and others it is a new journey to experience. Either way, as stated in the previous session, it is a time for both celebrating the birth of the savior and longing for second return where we will live in God's presence eternally. It is not about the theological assumptions of when and how that will take place, but about the hope that there is an eternal life and joy to come.

Today we will discuss the themes of advent Valley Ministries has chosen to highlight this year. Typically the general weekly topics of Advent within churches follow the themes of Hope, Peace, Joy and Love or follow characters like God's people, the Old Testament Prophets, John the Baptist and Mary. It is not uncommon, however, to use other topics or themes to tell the story of Advent. This year Valley Ministries is using the following themes: Exhort, Prepare, Rejoice and Behold.

- *Of those four themes, which most readily comes to your mind when contemplating the story of Advent? Why?*

Exhort

Advent is a time of waiting. Prior to Jesus it was of waiting for the Messiah – the one who would bring salvation and who would end persecution and suffering. Still, to this day, there are many who believe the Messiah has yet to come or, worse yet, that there will never be an end to suffering and persecution. To Christians our focus has been redirected, from the coming of the Messiah and salvation to the second coming, when the gift of salvation will be complete.

The journey of waiting is long, but fortunately we do not walk it alone. We are called, during this time of Advent, to be encouraged by hope, but also to encourage others in their commitment. Paul understood this gift of encouragement when he wrote to the Thessalonian church in I Thessalonians:

May God in God's very person and our Sovereign leader, Jesus, clear the road to you! And may Jesus pour on the love so it fills your lives and splashes over on everyone around you, just as it does from us to you. May you be infused with strength and purity, filled with confidence in the presence of God when our Savior Jesus arrives with all his followers. (I Thessalonians 3:11-13 - Message [with inclusification])

What an amazing picture of exhortation - that the love of Jesus in your life is so full that it splashes out onto the world around. What a different picture of Christianity the world would see if we had that kind of encouragement!

- *Have you ever experienced someone's love, peace, hope or joy so full in their lives that it splashed out onto you? If so, please share.*
- *Have you ever felt God's blessings so much that you can't help but pour them out to others? What was that like for you?*
- *How can we intentionally take part in encouraging during the season of Advent?*

Prepare

Advent is a time of waiting. And as we wait it is urgent that we prepare. Imagine, for a moment, that while driving home from this study you got a call from President Obama's executive assistant saying, "The President has made plans to visit random people in cities throughout America. Your name was randomly selected and he will be coming to your house tomorrow evening. The Secret Service will be there at 3pm to make sure the place is safe and President Obama will be there no later than 6pm." What would you do?

Chances are you would press on the accelerator just a little bit harder, get home, and start cleaning up. Maybe you would need to start from scratch and clean a huge mess or maybe you would just need to pick up the small piles of junk that accumulate without bothering your accustomed view. But certainly the majority of us would have some work to do. In a like manner, if we believe in life beyond this life, we need to be spiritually prepared for the presence now and coming return of Christ.

Matthew 25 tells a story that can seem disturbing, especially to the unprepared. Jesus talks about ten young virgins waiting for the bridegroom. Five were prepared with lamps filled to the brim with a little extra on the side, five were woefully unprepared. Basically the five unprepared virgins ran out of oil, the five prepared virgins would not share for fear they would run out, and the unprepared five had to go find more oil. When the bridegroom came they were not there and when they returned they were turned away from the celebration. The parable ends with a final warning (vs 13) "So stay alert. You have no idea when he (the Christ) might arrive."

I believe this is sad on two levels. I certainly do not want to be one of the five who were not prepared for the return of my savior, but I also do not want to be one of the five who had the opportunity to help someone else attend the banquet - and did nothing. We need to not only prepare our hearts to be able to join in an intimate relationship with a holy God and our minds to be strong, resisting temptation. But we also need to prepare the world around us, lifting up those in need and offering hope.

- *What does preparation for Advent mean to you?*
- *Share one or two things that came to mind as we were reading about the necessity of preparation in a Christian life?*
- *How can we intentionally take part in preparation during this season of Advent?*

Rejoice

The Advent season, as it so closely resembles the Christmas season on our annual calendar, is always filled with a great deal of anticipation, joy and excitement. But I think as we transition from the joy of what has become Christmas (gifts, Santa, decorations, shopping, shopping and shopping) to the joy of the Advent Christmas (the birth of Jesus the Christ, hope arriving in the form of innocence and purpose, the joy of grace fulfilling law), the focus and intensity of our joy is sure to shift and increase.

Many will celebrate family and food, children are already celebrating the boxes covered in beautiful wrapping paper with their names on them, and others have already celebrated their killer deals on Black Friday. We, however, have a different reason to rejoice – that salvation has come. It is not a matter of rejecting all other things fun and traditional around this time of year, rather not allowing them to take the place of the true source of joy. It is important to not let Christmas get in the way of Christ.

When I look at the responses of some of the Bible characters at the news of the birth of Jesus I am amazing:

Mary In her infamous song: “I’m bursting with God-news; I’m dancing the song of my Savior God... God remembered and piled on the mercies, piled them high. It’s exactly what was promised, beginning with Abraham and right up to now.” (Luke 1:46, 55)

The Angels: “Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him. (Luke 2:14)

Simeon, after he held baby Jesus in his arms: “With my own eyes I’ve seen your salvation; it’s now out in the open for everyone to see: A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people Israel.” (Luke 2:32)

Anna, a prophetess who spent her live praying, fasting, and worshipping day and night in the temple: “(She) broke into an anthem of praise to God, and talked about the child to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem.” (Luke 2:37-78)

These were people who understood the significance of Jesus when he was just a newborn baby. How much more should we be rejoicing knowing that not only was he born and lived a life of miracles and healing, but also that “He has died, He is risen, and He shall come again.”

- *How do you find the balance of celebrating Christmas without pushing Christ out of the way?*
- *How can we intentionally make this Advent season one of rejoicing?*

Behold

I will never forget the moment when my first son was born and the doctor placed him in my arms. I can close my eyes and watch that scene in slow motion with high-definition clarity. His first eye blink, his soft skin against my own, his unbelievable beauty. This baby whom I had felt moving inside of me, who had hiccups at every ultrasound, and who seemed to be doing aerobics every night at 10:30 pm was finally a reality. Mother... behold your son (and he was beautiful!).

I take that moment, fully appreciative of how incredible and overwhelming it was, and try to put myself in the moment of Mary first beholding Jesus the Christ. It is astounding to think of the intensity of that moment. I can barely catch my breath at the thought of it.

Then I think of how often we so easily take advantage of that same Christ who lived and died so that we would not die without life everlasting. We casually take his name in vain in a moment of anger. We often drop his name in an insincere prayer. We speak it out of familiarity sometimes and desperation at other times. But how often do we behold the reality of the savior - to know that we have a personal God who lives to love us; to thank God not for what God has given us, but because of the depth of love surrounding us; or to offer God our unhindered, undivided, and unadulterated worship. Perhaps that is the true meaning of worshiping in spirit and in truth.

I hope that at least once this season we will all take a moment just to behold. Behold the savior. Behold the savior in your life. Behold the savior in your hope and faith. Behold the savior in those around you. Behold the savior in your own life wanting to reach out through you and into your world. Behold the savior in the homeless woman holding a sign that asks for money. Behold the savior in the young teen who won't turn his music down or pull his pants up. Behold the creations of God walking around and the savior who resides in each of them. Remember, Christ did not come for one race, one political persuasion, one sexuality, one age group, one socio-economic group, or one country. Christ came for all - and through Him and only Him the world will be saved. Brothers and sisters... behold your savior.

- *In the often frustrating and maddening rush of the season how might you look to behold Jesus?*
- *How can we intentionally make this Advent season a chance to behold a new image of Christ?*
- *Discuss any other reflections that came to mind during this session.*