ADVENT SEASON PLANNING GUIDE

YEAR A

2025

THE DAWN IS CERTAIN

Pastor Mark Anderson

GOD'S WORD IS LIFE

www.pastormarkanderson.org

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INTRODUCTION TO YEAR A:
AN ADDRESS TO PREACHERS

Brothers and sisters in the office of preaching,

The Gospel of Matthew will not allow you to turn the pulpit into a platform for moral improvement or inspirational speeches. It is not a handbook for the ambitious. It is a hammer that smashes illusions, a scalpel that cuts too deep for comfort. You will be tempted—again and again—to soften its edge, to make the Sermon on the Mount manageable, to turn Christ's impossible commands into guidelines for "better living." Resist that temptation.

For if you domesticate Matthew, you rob your hearers of the Gospel. The command, "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," is not a goal to be gradually attained; it is the wall against which every ladder of human effort collapses. Preaching this Gospel means allowing that collapse to be heard, allowing the congregation to feel the futility of self-redemption. That is not cruelty. It is truth. And without the truth, the language of grace is cheap chatter.

Here lies the task of your preaching: to hold the hearers beneath the weight of God's demand long enough for the mercy of Christ to be more than sentiment. Only when the congregation knows it cannot climb to heaven will they hear the wonder that heaven has descended to them. The Jesus who speaks the impossible burden also carries that burden to the cross. The Judge who exposes our failure is the same One who is judged in our place. This paradox – the theology of the Cross - is the marrow of your proclamation.

Matthew will tempt you toward abstraction—toward "kingdom principles," toward "moral vision," toward a "therapeutic gospel" of encouragement. But Matthew's Christ is no abstraction. He is flesh in history, fulfilling promises spoken across centuries. He is manger, cross, and empty tomb. To preach him is not to hand down religious ideas but to announce an event that unmasks the present moment and breaks it open to the future.

Do not forget: the Word does not ask your permission to work. It is living and active, exposing the heart even as it heals it. Your task is not to make it palatable, but to get out of the way, to let the terrible command stand in all its force, and then to let the promise be heard as sheer gift. Where the law has done its killing, the gospel does its raising. Where the conscience is shivering, stripped bare, Christ clothes it in his own righteousness.

From this gift flows life—mercy practiced, peace pursued, neighbors sustained. But do not confuse this fruit with the root. Do not turn the gospel into a set of conditions. Preach the promise first, last, and always; God will let the fruits fall where they may, as He wills.

As you enter this year of Matthew, do not think yourself immune from its shattering force. The illusions you carry are as stubborn as those in your pews, and the Word will strip them bare. It will expose not only the poverty of your people but your own. Do not flee that exposure. Stand beneath it. For you are not the master of this Word but its servant, and a servant who must first be undone before he can speak.

Yet precisely there—in the undoing—lies your calling. From that posture you are sent to the weary, not with exhortations to try harder, but with the announcement that Christ has already borne the burden they cannot. The Word you carry is no religious maxim, no commentary on moral wisdom, but the living event that intrudes even now: a Word that tears down our pride and at the same moment clothes the sinner with mercy.

Preach it as one who knows it is a gift, not an achievement. Preach it with the confidence that baptism has already whispered over you and your hearers: the kingdom is not earned, it is given. And remember this: you are a dying person addressing dying people. The pulpit is no place for illusions of mastery, performance, or permanence. It is the place where weakness becomes the occasion for God's strength. Trust, therefore, that the Spirit will do what you cannot—raise the dead.

Pastor Mark Anderson

YEAR A

COMMENTARIES FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 2:1–5 – The Mountain of the Lord

The vision is staggering: nations streaming uphill, their weapons melted down into tools for harvest. *"They shall not learn war any more."* This is not an ethical program or a United Nations resolution. Isaiah is not sketching a human achievement plan. He is proclaiming what only God can do. That means, first of all, we hear it as judgment. For we are experts at "learning war," whether in global conflict, domestic politics, or even in the small trenches of family grudges. To imagine a people who no longer even study the art of hostility—that exposes us. We love our battles too much.

But into that unmasking comes the promise. Isaiah speaks this not to a triumphant people but to a frightened, broken one. The Word holds out a peace so beyond us that it can only come from God's own mountain. In Advent, this is the crucial note: the kingdom does not ascend from us to heaven; it descends from God to earth. The weapons are not repurposed by our good intentions or virtue but by God's judgment and mercy. For those crushed by violence—whether global or private—the vision is not sentimental. It is a sheer promise that God will break into history with his future.

Psalm 122 – Praying for the Peace of Jerusalem

"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" Gladness here is not cheap happiness. It is the relief of stepping into a place where God still speaks. But the psalm quickly shifts: *"Pray for the peace of Jerusalem."* In other words, joy and longing walk together. The psalmist admits what we so often deny: peace is not in our possession. It must be prayed for, begged for.

Here Advent takes us by the hand. We are not asked to muster pious feelings; we are given words to say when our own fail. The psalms do not decorate Advent, they carry it. They let us cry out with

both joy and sorrow, sometimes in the same breath. Helmut Thielicke once said that prayer is where we confess our poverty and are rich only in what we are given. Psalm 122 is exactly that: we have no peace of our own, but we are permitted to ask. And Advent tells us: the asking is not in vain. The Light has already stepped into the darkness; the Lord himself is our peace.

Romans 13:11–14 – Put On The Lord Jesus Christ

"Now is the moment to wake from sleep." Paul doesn't ease us into Advent. He doesn't offer a spiritual warm-up. He blasts the trumpet: *Now*. The night is over. The day is at hand. Wake up!

Here is law in its pure form. It does not suggest; it commands. But we should not soften it. Paul is not saying, "Try harder, be a little more awake." He is saying, "You are asleep. Wake up!" And in that command, our helplessness is revealed. Who among us can rouse ourselves from spiritual slumber, from our drowsing in the comfort of sin? Who can strip off the works of darkness by sheer will?

Yet notice: embedded in the command is the gift. The day has already dawned. Christ has already been put on us in baptism. The armor of light is not our tailoring but his clothing. Gerhard Forde would say: this is not improvement language but resurrection language. To wake from sleep is to be *jolted* from death to life. Advent is not about polishing ourselves up; it is about being dressed anew by the Christ who has claimed us. Out of that gift, Paul dares to call us into the light. Not as if salvation depends on us, but because salvation is already ours.

Matthew 24:36–44 – Keep Awake

"No one knows the day or the hour." Advent begins with this devastating truth: you are not in control. The calendars we arrange, the securities we construct, the futures we imagine—all of them are exposed as dreaming, wishful thinking, illusions. The Son of Man comes at an hour you do not expect. Law, unvarnished.

"Keep awake," Jesus says. But this cannot mean an anxious program of vigilance, as though salvation hinges on whether we stay alert enough. That way lies despair, because we are all dozers, all nodders, all sleepers. The command unmasks our condition. And yet here is the gospel hidden in the very image: the One who comes like a thief in the night does not come to rob us but to steal away our false securities, to strip us down to need, and to give us himself.

These words fall on people already weary, anxious, burdened. For them, the call to wakefulness is not another demand to achieve, but the announcement that Someone is on the way—someone who refuses to leave us asleep in the dark. The thief is, in truth, the Bridegroom. The coming is not a threat but mercy.

Advent begins, then, with the sharpest command and the most astonishing gift. We are told to keep awake, and in that exposure, we realize we cannot. And then comes the impossible news: Christ himself keeps us awake by his promise. He has come. He comes now. He will come again. The dawn is certain, not because we have kept the vigil, but because the Light himself has risen and walks in our darkness.

YEAR A

SERMON FOR ADVENT 1

Texts: Isaiah 2:1–5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11–14; Matthew 24:36–44

Beloved hearers of the Word of God, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent does not begin with comfort. It begins with urgency. Isaiah dreams of a mountain lifted above the hills, nations streaming to it, weapons melted into tools for harvest. "They shall not learn war anymore." It's breathtaking. But before it comforts, it condemns. Because we are not a people who have forgotten war—we are people who keep inventing new ways of waging it.

You don't have to look far: drones flying silently overhead, nuclear stockpiles quietly updated, neighbors divided into political tribes, marriages turned into cold wars. Even our words on social media are sharpened like swords. Isaiah's vision unmasks us: we love our battles too much. Without them, we hardly know who we are, for it is not just that we live in a violent world, but that we are violent in heart. Not just that we are distracted, but that *we are* dead in sin and cannot wake ourselves.

And yet—Isaiah does not leave us in judgment. Into that wasteland, he dares to promise: God himself will do it. Peace will not come by the next treaty, the next election, the next inspirational campaign. It will come only when God descends with His own future. For those crushed by violence—whether the violence of nations or the violence of words at the dinner table—this is not sentiment. It is your only hope.

The psalmist sings, "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" That gladness is not the shallow cheer of a holiday jingle. It is the relief of stepping into a place where God still speaks. But almost at once, the psalmist adds: "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem." Joy and longing, hand in hand.

And isn't that our Advent? We string lights, but we still see the shadows. We gather around tables, but some chairs remain painfully empty. We speak of "peace on earth," but our headlines drip with blood and violence. The psalm exposes us: we do not have peace in our possession. We cannot manufacture it. It must be begged for, prayed for.

That is why the psalms are so precious. They give us words when we have none. When our own hearts are too numb or too weary to pray, the psalms pray for us. "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem." Not because we are good at prayer, but because God delights to give what we cannot create. Advent assures us the asking is not in vain: the Lord himself is our peace.

Then Paul blasts the trumpet: "Now is the moment to wake from sleep. The night is far gone, the day is near." Paul does not hand us gentle encouragement. He shouts us awake. And the law in his words is sharp: you are asleep.

And isn't it true? We sleepwalk through life, lulled by glowing screens, numbed by endless entertainment, medicated by shopping, distracted by work. We tell ourselves there will be time later to forgive, to reconcile, to return to God. And so we drift, drowsy in sin, unaware of the dawn breaking around us.

Who among us can rouse ourselves? Who can throw off the works of darkness by sheer willpower? None of us. The law shows us that we cannot even stay awake to our own lives.

But here is the gift hidden in Paul's shout: the day has already dawned. Christ has already wrapped himself around us in baptism. To "put on Christ" is not our achievement—it is a garment laid on us. The armor of light is not our tailoring but his. Advent is not self-improvement season; it is resurrection season. Sleepers do not wake themselves—the voice of Christ wakes the dead.

And then Jesus speaks: "No one knows the day or the hour." Which is to say: you are not in control. Our calendars, our strategies, our retirement plans, our ten-year projections—they are sandcastles that stand only until the next tide comes in. One phone call at midnight, one doctor's report, one accident, and the whole illusion is gone. The Son of Man comes at an hour we do not expect.

"Keep awake," Jesus says. And if this were only another command, it would destroy us. Because who can stay awake? We nod off at the wheel, we fall asleep in our prayers, we drift in our faith. We

are not watchful sentries—we are drowsy wanderers. If salvation depends on our vigilance, we are lost.

But here is the gospel even in the thief's image. The One who comes in the night does not come to rob us. He comes to steal away the false securities that cannot save us, to strip us down to need, and to give us Himself. The thief is, in truth, the Bridegroom. His coming is not a threat but mercy.

Advent begins with the sharpest command and the most astonishing gift. We are told to stay awake, and the law unmasks us: we cannot. But then comes the impossible news: Christ himself keeps us awake by his promise. He has come. He comes now. He will come again.

So hear it, not as a burden, but as mercy. Your sins are forgiven. Your illusions are stripped away. And your future is not in your hands but in his. The desert will bloom. The prisoners will be set free. The weary will be sustained. The doubting will be blessed. The dawn is certain.

Amen.

YEAR A

COMMENTARIES FOR THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 11:1–10 – The Shoot From The Stump Of Jesse

It is no accident that the prophet starts with a stump. Advent begins in ruins. Israel's line of kings had collapsed, the dynasty of David reduced to a memory. This stump is judgment—our projects, our empires, our plans cut down. That is where Advent places us, and it is not comfortable. We prefer fresh growth, not reminders of what has failed.

But here comes the promise: from the lifeless stump, a shoot springs, not by our tending or gardening, but by God's own action. The messiah is born from death, not from strength. His rule is not maintained by military might or propaganda, but by the spirit of God abiding with him. And when he reigns, the wolf and the lamb lie down together, creation itself is reordered, and knowledge of the lord fills the earth.

This vision is not law—it is promise. It is not a strategy to implement, it is a gift to receive. That is the whole shape of advent: we are driven down to stumps, stripped of our illusions of progress and permanence, and then shown life only God can give.

Psalm 72:1–7, 18–19 – Prayer For The Righteous King

The psalmist prays, *"give the king your justice, o god."* Notice: justice is not in the king's possession. It must be given. Already, we are exposed—our rulers, our systems, our ideals, all of them lack the justice we need. We cannot generate it. That's the law at work, stripping us of our faith in presidents, parliaments, and princes.

But the psalm does not leave us with despair. It pictures a king who will defend the cause of the poor, deliver the needy, crush the oppressor, and bring peace that lasts as long as the sun. No

human king ever fulfilled such a prayer. The longing stretches beyond Solomon, beyond David, to The Messiah.

And here is the gospel: God answers prayer with Christ. We are not told to try harder to make rulers righteous. We are taught to pray, and then to watch as God gives the one King whose throne endures. Advent is the season of praying for what we cannot produce—and confessing that in Christ the prayer is already answered.

Romans 15:4–13 – Hope For Jews And Gentiles

Paul turns us from despair to endurance, from division to hope. He writes, *"whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."* That is not self-help. It is a sheer announcement: the God who worked through Israel's history still works now.

But first, the law: Paul unmasks our divisions. Jew and gentile, insider and outsider, one against another—we fracture easily. Harmony is not in our nature. Look around. Our attempts at unity collapse into tribes and slogans. Advent does not allow us to romanticize human togetherness.

Yet here is the gift: Christ became a servant, confirming the promises so that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. Unity is not forged by compromise but given by Christ. Hope is not optimism but trust in the God who raises the dead. "May the god of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing." Notice: the filling is God's action, not ours. That is Advent's word: stop faking, pretending you can hold it together. God himself does it in Christ.

Matthew 3:1–12 – John The Baptist: Repent!

Advent will not let us hide in sentimentality. Into the season barges John—wild, rough, merciless. *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."* His words strip us down: brood of vipers, fruitless trees, chaff ready for burning. He names what we try to disguise. His law is not a gentle

suggestion; it is exposure, total and relentless. The axe is at the root. The fire is ready, hungry to consume.

But John is not the end. He points. *"One more powerful than I is coming."* That is the pivot. John cannot save. The law cannot save. But he announces the Christ who baptizes, who repents us with the Spirit and fire. This fire is not only destruction, but purification; not only judgment, but New Creation. Advent drives us into this tension: we are undone, but the one who comes remakes us.

This is the gospel hidden in John's preaching. He announces judgment so that when Christ comes, we cling to Him as our only rescue. Advent faith is not improvement—it is desperation turned to trust. And in that trust, life begins again.

YEAR A

SERMON FOR ADVENT 2

Texts: Isaiah 2:1–5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11–14; Matthew 24:36–44

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isaiah promises a day when weapons are beaten into plows and war is unlearned. Sounds good, right? Not so fast: this word first condemns us. Because the truth is—we love our wars.

We may wring our hands over global conflicts, but we know the little wars we keep fighting in our own hearts. The war of spouses who can't forgive. The war of siblings who haven't spoken in years. The war of political tribes sharpening their talking points like swords. If war disappeared tomorrow, some of us would be lost. We are addicted to the fight because it makes us feel alive and righteous.

Isaiah unmasks us: "They shall not learn war any more"—and we suddenly see how much time and money and energy we spend on exactly that. We aren't neutral. We are bound. We are guilty.

And here comes the gospel: God himself promises to do what we cannot. He will bring peace not by our virtue, not by our gradual moral evolution, but by breaking in with His kingdom. The mountain of the Lord rises, not the mountain of human progress. Advent says: God's future is coming down the hill whether we're ready or not. And that is our only hope.

"I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'" Beautiful words from the Psalms. But quickly, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem."

Why pray? Because peace is not in our hands. The psalmist admits what we deny: we don't have peace. Not in our homes, not in our cities, not in our hearts. We pray because we are poor, empty, unable, unwilling.

That's law. It leaves us exposed. We don't even know how to want peace without twisting it into our version of control.

But here's the promise: God invites us to ask anyway. He gives us the very words we cannot find. And then He answers them, not with a theory but with a person: Christ himself, who is our peace. God steps into the war zone, takes the hostility into his own body on the cross, and makes peace by the blood he sheds. So when we pray for peace, Advent says: the answer is already on the way.

Paul shouts: "Now is the moment to wake from sleep!" Law at full volume. Because we are not awake—we are asleep in the dark. Asleep in distractions, in excuses, in the lie that tomorrow will be the day we finally get serious about God and our neighbors.

And here's the truth: people asleep in the deadness of sin don't raise themselves. Paul's law unmasks us: we cannot rouse ourselves.

But then the gospel: Christ himself has already roused us. The dawn has already broken in him. The armor of light is not something we stitch together. It is Christ himself, put on us in baptism, wrapping us in his righteousness. That means Paul's shout is not an impossible task. It is a declaration: "Wake up! Because you are already alive in Christ." Advent is resurrection, not improvement.

Jesus says: "No one knows the day or the hour." That is law in its sharpest form. We are not in control. We can't manage the timeline. All our calendars, all our careful plans, all our securities—one doctor's call, one accident, one last breath, and they collapse. The Lord comes when we don't expect it.

"Keep awake," he says. But here's the law's punch: we can't. We are sleepers. We drift. We nod off at the wheel. If salvation depended on our staying awake, we would all be lost.

But here's the promise hidden even in the image of the thief. The One who comes in the night doesn't come to rob us but to rescue us. He comes to steal away our illusions and give us himself. The thief is the Bridegroom. His coming is not threat but gift.

And so Advent leaves us both exposed and comforted. Exposed: we cannot keep ourselves awake. Comforted: Christ himself keeps us awake by his Word. He has come. He comes now. He will come again. The dawn is certain. Not because we've been faithful watchers, but because the Light himself has risen and will not leave us in the dark.

So Advent strips us bare. Isaiah shows us our love of war. The psalm unmasks our lack of peace. Paul shakes us from our slumber. Jesus tells us our control is an illusion. Law everywhere—until only Christ is left.

And that is the gospel. He is our peace. He is our light. He is our dawn.

Some of you are weary already, anxious before the season has even begun. Advent does not say, "Try harder." It says, "Look up. The Light has come. The Lord is near."

And so we light a candle in the darkness, not to chase it away by our own flame, but to confess the truth: the dawn is certain. Sin is forgiven. Christ is coming. Thanks be to God.

Amen.

YEAR A

COMMENTARIES FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1–10 – The Desert Shall Bloom

Isaiah speaks to people whose lives feel like wastelands. Exile, ruin, wilderness—that's where Israel stood, and that's where we often stand. The law reveals this: our own strength dries up. Joy becomes brittle. Hope cracks like sunbaked earth. Perhaps you know that desert: an illness that drains you, a grief that will not ease, a fear that parches even your prayers.

But into this bleak landscape comes a staggering word: *"The desert shall rejoice and blossom."* This is not the optimism of a motivational speaker; it is the promise of God himself. Where there is no water, God brings streams. Where there is no life, God brings bloom. Even the weakest—the blind, the lame, the deaf—are named as recipients of His mercy.

Advent's gospel is that God does not wait for us to make gardens; He comes into our desert. He creates life where we cannot. He builds a highway of holiness, not so we can climb to him, but so he can come to us and carry us home.

Psalm 146:5–10 – The God Who Sets Prisoners Free *(or Luke 1:46–55 – The Magnificat)*

The psalmist warns us: *"Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help."* That is law. It exposes how quickly we pin our hopes on leaders, systems, experts—even ourselves. And when they fail us, as they always do, we are left anxious, bitter, or despairing.

But listen to the psalm's turn: *"The Lord sets the prisoners free… the Lord lifts up those who are bowed down."* Mary sings the same in her Magnificat: the proud scattered, the lowly lifted, the hungry filled. Here is the gospel: God himself steps in where human saviors collapse.

This means that those who feel most overlooked are not overlooked by God. The bowed-down are the very ones He raises. The hungry are the very ones He fills. Advent teaches us that it is safe to admit our poverty, because God delights to meet us there. He does not despise the fainthearted; He covers them with His mercy.

James 5:7–10 – Be Patient Until the Coming of the Lord

James says: *"Be patient."* Law strikes here. We are not patient people. We crave immediacy. We demand answers now. We fidget, complain, and despair when the wait drags on. Advent names this truth: waiting is hard, and we are poor at it.

But James does not simply scold. He lifts our eyes to a farmer waiting for rain, to prophets who endured suffering. Waiting is not empty time; it is promised time. The law tells us: we cannot hasten the Lord's coming. The gospel promises: the Judge who is "standing at the doors" is not a stranger but the Christ who has already carried judgment for us.

The Lord says; I know the waiting wears on you. I know it feels like God delays. But the promise stands: My coming is certain, and in the meantime, I will sustain you.

Advent patience is not gritting your teeth; it is leaning on a promise so sure it cannot fail.

Matthew 11:2–11 – John's Question

John the Baptist—this fiery prophet, this bold preacher—now sits in prison and asks: *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* This is law in its terrible, quiet form. It shows us that even the strongest falter. Even faith trembles. Advent does not hide this; it names it. We, too, know the prison of doubt.

Jesus does not crush John for his question. He does not say, "How dare you doubt me?" Instead, he points: *"The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."* In other words: "Look at what I am already doing. I am fulfilling the promise."

The gospel here is not a demand but comfort. Christ meets our doubts with his deeds. He blesses even the faltering, saying, *"Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."* Your questions do not disqualify you. Your faith may be trembling, but Christ is steady. Advent teaches us that Christ comes not to the triumphant but to the doubting, not to the confident but to the weary.

Advent 3 is not for the strong, but for the weak. It is not for those who have mastered waiting, but for those who can barely endure. It is not for those who stand tall, but for those who are bowed down.

The law unmasks us: our lives are deserts, our saviors are false, our patience is thin, our faith falters. But the gospel comforts us: God makes the desert bloom, he lifts the lowly, he sustains our waiting, he answers our doubts.

The kingdom is not built by us; it breaks in through Christ. And he comes not as a taskmaster but as mercy in the flesh.

YEAR A

SERMON FOR ADVENT 3

Texts: Isaiah 35:1–10; Psalm 146:5–10 / Luke 1:46–55; James 5:7–10; Matthew 11:2–11

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Isaiah speaks into a wasteland, into our world. Not a garden, not a vineyard, not a green pasture—but a desert. Exile, ruin, wilderness. And if we're honest, that is where we so often live too. Our strength dries up, joy becomes brittle, hope cracks like a field of parched earth. Some of you know that desert well: the illness that drains you, the resentment that binds you, the grief that won't ease, the fear that dries even your prayers.

And the truth is, no matter how much we try to make things bloom, we can't. The law names it: we cannot water our own deserts. Our techniques, our plans, our "self-care" programs—they might dull the ache for a moment, but the sand always returns. The desert wins.

And then into that wasteland comes a word so outrageous it sounds almost cruel: *"The desert shall rejoice and blossom."* But this is not the pep talk of a motivational speaker. This is not wishful thinking. It is the promise of God himself. Where there is no water, God brings streams. Where there is no life, He brings bloom. And notice who is named first: the blind, the lame, the deaf. The weak, the useless, the ones written off by the world. They are the first to receive his mercy. The gospel of Advent is this: God does not wait for us to make gardens; He comes into our deserts. He carries us home on a highway he has built, paved with His own mercy.

The psalmist adds a sting: *"Do not put your trust in princes, in mortals in whom there is no help."* That is law, plain and sharp. And it exposes us. Because that is exactly what we do—we put our trust in mortals. In presidents and politicians, in bosses and experts, in ourselves. We think: if only this policy, this paycheck, this therapy, this treatment, then finally things will hold. But they don't. And when they fail, we are left anxious, bitter, angry, despairing. The psalm unmasks us: we have been praying to false gods all along.

But listen to the gospel turn: *"The Lord sets prisoners free. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous."* Mary sings the same in her Magnificat: the proud scattered, the lowly lifted, the hungry filled, the rich sent away empty. This is not advice about how to live better. This is God himself stepping in where every mortal savior, every self-salvation scheme collapses. Those who feel most overlooked are not overlooked by God. Those who are bowed down are the very ones he raises. The hungry are the very ones he fills. It is safe to confess our poverty, because God delights to meet us there. He does not despise the fainthearted. He covers them with his mercy.

James says, *"Be patient."* But who among us is patient? This is law, and it hits hard. We are not patient. We live on two-day shipping, instant downloads, same-day delivery. We check our phones constantly. We demand answers now. And when there is delay, we fall into despair. Waiting feels like dying. James names us for what we are: impatient, restless, unable to endure.

But James does not leave us under the law. He lifts our eyes to the farmer waiting for rain, to the prophets who endured suffering. Waiting, he says, is not empty—it is promised time. And here is the gospel: the Judge who is standing at the door has not come to condemn. He is Christ, who has already carried judgment for us. That means the waiting is not a cruel test. It is the time in which the promise holds us fast. Advent patience is not gritting our teeth—it is leaning back into the certainty that Christ is coming. And even more: that Christ has already come into our now.

And then John the Baptist. Bold John, fiery John, the prophet who called out kings and baptized crowds in the Jordan—now sits in a cell, staring at stone walls. And he sends his messengers to ask the question that rings through the centuries: *"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"* Even John wavers. Even John doubts. That is law in its most devastating form: even the strongest falter. Even the faithful tremble. Advent will not let us pretend otherwise. We too live in prisons of doubt, wondering if Christ is real, if He's coming, if He sees us.

But notice what Jesus does. He does not scold John. He does not say, "How dare you question me?" He points: "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news." In other words: the promises are already happening. Look and see what I am doing. The gospel here is not a demand but sheer, present comfort and assurance. Christ meets our doubt with His deeds. He steadies the trembling by pointing to His works. And then he says, *"Blessed is the one who takes no offense at me."* Blessed—even when faith is weak. Blessed—even

when questions linger. Your doubt does not disqualify you. Your faith may falter, but Christ is steady.

So, Advent 3 is not for the strong. It is not for those who have mastered waiting. It is not for the triumphant and the confident. It is for the weak. For the bowed down. For the restless. For the doubting. For you. The law unmasks us: our lives are deserts, our saviors are false, our patience is thin, our faith falters. But the gospel comforts us: God makes the desert bloom, he lifts the lowly, he sustains our waiting, he answers our doubts.

The kingdom is not built by us. It breaks in through Christ. And he comes not as a taskmaster but as mercy in the flesh. He comes not with a list of demands, but with a highway of grace. He comes not to congratulate the strong, but to raise the fainthearted.

So hear it now, not as a whisper but as the trumpet of God: Christ has come, and your sin is forgiven. Christ is coming, and no desert shall remain barren. The wilderness will burst into blossom, the dry places will sing for joy. The chains will fall, the prisoners walk free. The bowed and broken will be lifted, the weary borne up on everlasting arms. Even the doubting—yes, even you—shall be gathered in blessing. And over it all, like the sun breaking the horizon, God's truth shines unshakable: the dawn is certain.

Thanks be to God.

YEAR A

COMMENTARIES FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 7:10–16 – A Sign Given to the Unbelieving

King Ahaz is cornered, his kingdom is threatened, his nerves frayed. God himself offers him a sign, any sign, deep as Sheol or high as heaven. Ahaz piously refuses: *"I will not put the Lord to the test."* But the refusal is not faith—it is unbelief disguised as humility. Ahaz wants to keep his options open, to trust in his own political maneuvering.

That is law: we are Ahaz. We decline God's promise because it seems too risky. We prefer to manage our own futures, even if our schemes collapse. We wrap our unbelief in the piety of not bothering God, or of cooperating with God. But it is still unbelievable.

Yet the gospel breaks through even Ahaz's refusal. "The Lord himself will give you a sign." Not your choosing, not your deserving, but his gift: *"Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel."* God-with-us. Even when we won't ask, even when we resist, the promise is given.

Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19 – Restore Us, O God

The psalm is the cry of people who know their need. "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." Law is here in the repeated refrain: we cannot restore ourselves. We are broken, fed with tears, scorned by neighbors. Left to ourselves, we do not shine—we wither and fade.

But the refrain is also gospel: salvation is as simple and as impossible as the shining of God's face. Not our striving, but His turning toward us. Advent puts this prayer on our lips, teaching us to cry out for the very thing God has already promised: Emmanuel, the shining face of God in flesh.

Romans 1:1–7 – The Gospel Promised Beforehand

Paul opens his letter with an explosion of good news: the gospel is not a new fad, not human invention, but the fulfillment of promises spoken long ago. The Son, descended from David according to the flesh, declared Son of God in power by resurrection.

The law here is subtle but sharp: we do not need one more human scheme, one more spiritual self-help strategy. Those collapse. What we need is what God alone provides—his Son. Paul leaves no room for self-made religion; everything hangs on Christ.

The gospel is this: you are included. "Including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ." Advent proclaims that God's plan was never for someone else—it is for you. You belong, not because you chose him, but because he called you.

Matthew 1:18–25 – God With Us in the Mess

Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant, and law crashes down. He knows the child is not his. He plans a quiet dismissal, trying to strike a balance between righteousness and compassion. And here we see ourselves—caught in impossible situations, trying to manage damage, to do the least harm, to cover shame.

But into Joseph's turmoil comes the angel's word: *"Do not be afraid… what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit."* Law unmasks our fear and our schemes; gospel announces God's intervention. The child's name is Jesus—"for he will save his people from their sins." Not from inconvenience, not from Rome, not from embarrassment, but from sin itself.

And Matthew makes it plain: this is Emmanuel, "God with us." Not God against us, not God above us, not God checking in occasionally—but God with us, in flesh, in the middle of scandal and fear. Advent ends here: the impossible gift given, not to the strong but to the frightened, not to the faithful but to the doubting, not to the perfect but to the sinful.

The Fourth Sunday of Advent brings us to the threshold of Christmas. Law exposes us as unbelieving Ahaz, as broken Israel, as scheme-making Joseph with all his good intentions. Gospel consoles us with the sign, the child, the promise: Emmanuel, God with us. The kingdom is not a program we launch, but a gift we receive. And the gift comes precisely where faith falters, where life cracks, where hope runs out. Christ has come, and the dawn is certain.

YEAR A

SERMON FOR ADVENT 4

Texts: Isaiah 7:10–16; Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19; Romans 1:1–7; Matthew 1:18–25

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Advent does not end in sentiment. It ends in a scandal. Joseph discovers Mary is with child. He knows the child is not his. And in that moment, the bottom falls out. Law crashes in. Whatever hopes Joseph had for his life, his marriage, his reputation—shattered. What can he do but quietly dismiss her? A broken engagement, a wounded heart, a shame that lingers in the village whispers. This is how Advent ends: with impossibility, with crisis, with human schemes to minimize damage. Sound familiar?

But this is where God breaks in. "Do not be afraid," the angel says. What Joseph sees as scandal, God names as salvation. The child is conceived by the Holy Spirit. His name will be Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins. This is not Joseph's plan, not Mary's plan, not our plan. This is God's plan, crashing into the mess of human fear and unbelief.

Isaiah had already shown us this pattern. King Ahaz, terrified by enemies on every side, refuses God's invitation to ask for a sign. He cloaks his unbelief in piety: "I will not put the Lord to the test." But the truth is, Ahaz does not want God's interference. He prefers to manage his politics himself. We know that temptation. We resist God's promise because it means handing over control. We would rather scheme, maneuver, fix things ourselves—even if the whole house collapses. That is law: our refusal to trust, our addiction to control. And how is that working?

And yet God will not let unbelief have the last word. "The Lord himself will give you a sign." Not your choosing, not your deserving, but his gift: "Look, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel." God-with-us. Even in our refusal, even in our schemes, even in our fear—God gives himself.

The psalmist puts our cry into words: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." That refrain is law—it admits we cannot restore ourselves. We are broken. Our bread is tears. Our lives are fragile. And yet it is also gospel: salvation is as simple, as impossible, as God turning his face toward us. Advent teaches us to pray this way: not boasting of our strength, but begging for God's mercy. And here is the promise—he does not despise our begging. He answers with his face, shining in the child of Mary.

Paul begins his great letter to Rome with the same announcement. The gospel is not a fad. It is not another spiritual improvement plan. It is the fulfillment of a promise made long before: the Son of David, crucified and raised, who calls us to belong to him. That is law and gospel together. Law, because it strips away every self-made religion, every spiritual strategy, every illusion that we can engineer salvation. Gospel, because it declares: you are included. "Including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ." You are not on the outside. You are his.

And then Matthew names it clearly: Emmanuel. God with us. Not God above us, watching. Not God against us, condemning. Not God far away, waiting. God with us. With us in Mary's fear. With us in Joseph's confusion. With us in Israel's exile. With us in our own griefs, our doubts, our willfulness, our failures. God with us, even when we don't want Him, even when we can't trust Him, even when we are trying to dismiss Him quietly out of our lives. He comes anyway. He is God, after all. Not some two-bit deity.

That is Advent's scandal and Advent's gospel. The kingdom is not built by us; it breaks in through Jesus. It does not wait for our readiness; it comes in spite of our resistance. It does not appear among the triumphant, but among the frightened and the failing. Emmanuel is not a title for the victorious—it is the gift for the undeserving.

So we arrive at the end of Advent not with arms laden in triumph, but with hands laid bare. Not with trophies of accomplishment, but with a single cry upon our lips: *"Restore us, O God."* And into those empty hands—your hands—God places his Son. Into your pleading, he speaks his unshakable *Yes*. Into your sin, he presses a Savior.

Hear the promise: Christ is Immanuel. Christ is God with us. With you. Your sin is forgiven. In the marrow of your weakness, in the wreckage of your doubt, in the shadow of your grave—he is with

you. He has come; he comes now in Word and Supper; he will come again with glory. And so the future, the new creation itself, is wrested from your grasp and placed in His scarred hands.

Then the desert shall burst with blossoms. The prisoners shall step into freedom. The weary shall be borne up on everlasting arms. The doubting shall be wrapped in blessing. And the night, at last, shall surrender to the morning. The dawn, God's dawn, is certain.

Amen.

YEAR A

KEY GREEK WORDS IN THE ADVENT GOSPELS

Advent 1 – Matthew 24:36–44

The Coming of the Son of Man

Key Words:

- **παρουσία (parousia)** – "coming, presence" (v. 37, 39)
    - Not just an arrival but an appearing that changes the whole landscape of reality. In classical Greek it denotes the official visit of a ruler. In Matthew it carries eschatological weight: the King's presence makes every hidden thing visible. Preaching: the future is not ours to secure but His to reveal.
- **γρηγορεῖτε (grēgoreite)** – "keep awake, stay alert" (v. 42)
    - A watchword of Matthew. It is less about frantic vigilance than about the refusal to dull one's heart with self-security. Preaching: Advent faith is not paranoia but attentiveness.
- **ἑτοιμάζεσθε (hetoimazesthe)** – "be ready, prepared" (v. 44)
    - The verb comes from temple preparation (making ready for sacrifice or worship). Readiness here is being positioned to receive. Preaching: readiness is trust, not self-arming.

Advent 2 – Matthew 3:1–12

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

Key Words:

- **μετανοεῖτε (metanoeite)** – "repent" (v. 2)
    - More than moral reform, it is a fundamental turning of mind/heart—literally "change your mind." Preaching: repentance is not self-improvement but being repented. The collapse of old securities before God's Word of promise.

- **βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν (basileia tōn ouranōn)** – "kingdom of heaven" (v. 2)
    - Not a distant place but God's active reign breaking in. Matthew prefers "heaven" to avoid overuse of the divine name, but the force is the same: God's rule intrudes now.
- **ἄξιον τοῦ μετανοίας (axion tēs metanoias)** – "fruit worthy of repentance" (v. 8)
    - Not conditions for God's mercy but the visible signs that life has already been seized by it. Fruit flows from root, not the other way around.
- **πνεῦμα ἅγιον καὶ πῦρ (pneuma hagion kai pyr)** – "Holy Spirit and fire" (v. 11)
    - The Messiah's baptism is purgation and renewal together—both destruction of the old and ignition of the new. Preaching: the Gospel does not polish life; it consumes and recreates life.

Advent 3 – Matthew 11:2–11

Messengers from John the Baptist

Key Words:

- **σκανδαλίζω (skandalizō)** – "to stumble, be offended" (v. 6)
    - Jesus says: "Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me." The stumbling block is precisely the weakness of Christ—his refusal to conform to messianic expectations. Preaching: faith clings to a Messiah who does not look the part.
- **πτωχοί (ptōchoi)** – "poor" (v. 5)
    - Not just economically disadvantaged, but beggars, the utterly dependent. These are the first recipients of the kingdom. Preaching: the Gospel is heard where self-sufficiency has collapsed.
- **μαλακοί (malakoi)** – "soft" (v. 8)
    - Used to describe those in kings' houses wearing "soft" clothing. Here it contrasts the rough prophet with the polished elites. Preaching: God's Word comes not from the palaces of comfort but from the wilderness.

Advent 4 – Matthew 1:18–25

The Birth of Jesus the Messiah

Key Words:

- **Ἰησοῦς (Iēsous)** – "Jesus" (v. 21)
    - Derived from Hebrew *Yehoshua*: "Yahweh saves." The name itself is the sermon. Preaching: salvation is not a project but a person.
- **Ἐμμανουήλ (Emmanouēl)** – "God with us" (v. 23)
    - The fulfillment of Isaiah. Not "God above us" or "God against us," but "with." Preaching: God's solidarity is not symbolic but fleshly, historical.
- **παρθένος (parthenos)** – "virgin" (v. 23)
    - Signals divine initiative. The birth is not the fruit of human planning but God's sheer act. Preaching: salvation begins where human possibility ends.
- **σῴσει (sōsei)** – "he will save" (v. 21)
    - Future active of *sōzō*. Not "he will inspire" or "improve," but deliver from sin. Preaching: the Gospel names sin honestly because it promises real rescue.

Summary for Preachers

Across Advent, Matthew's Gospel drills the same rhythm: command that unmasks, promise that consoles. The Greek words sharpen this edge. *Parousia* and *grēgoreite* stress vigilance; *metanoeite* and *pyr* create a turning that burns; *skandalizō* warns against the offense of weakness; *Iēsous* and *Emmanouēl* declare salvation as person, as presence. Together, they trace the Advent arc: the impossible demand, the collapse of human schemes, and the sheer gift of God-with-us.

CANDLE-LIGHTING LITURGIES FOR ADVENT A

ADVENT 1 – THE CANDLE OF HOPE

(Matthew 24:36–44; Candle of Hope)

Leader: Christ says: *You do not know on what day your Lord is coming.*

People: We confess our illusions of control, our restless striving, our weary fear.

Leader: Yet into our unpreparedness comes the promise: the Son of Man will appear, bringing mercy with him.

People: Our hope is not in ourselves, but in Christ who comes.

Leader: We light the candle of Hope, not to banish the night, but to trust the dawn that Christ brings.

(Light the first candle.)

Hymn: *Savior of the Nations, Come*

- ELW 263
- LBW 28
- LSB 332
- TLH 95

All Sing:

Savior of the nations, come; Virgin's Son, make here Your home.

Marvel now, O heav'n and earth, That the Lord chose such a birth.

ADVENT 2 – THE CANDLE OF PEACE

(Matthew 3:1–12; Candle of Peace)

Leader: The prophet cries: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has drawn near.*

People: We confess our unrest, our fractured lives, our barren fruit.

Leader: But the One who comes baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire—burning away the old, planting new life, repenting us in faith.

People: In him, judgment gives way to mercy; in him, God makes peace with sinners.

Leader: We light the candle of Peace, not because we have secured it, but because Christ is our peace.

(Light the second candle.)

Hymn: *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry*

- ELW 249
- LBW 36
- LSB 344
- TLH 274

All Sing:

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry Announces that the Lord is nigh;

Awake and hearken, for he brings Glad tidings of the King of kings!

ADVENT 3 – THE CANDLE OF JOY

(Matthew 11:2–11; Candle of Joy)

Leader: John asked: *Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?*

People: We confess our doubts, our stumbling, our offense at your hiddenness and weakness.

Leader: Yet the blind receive sight, the poor hear good news, the weary are blessed.

People: In you, despair is interrupted by joy.

Leader: We light the candle of Joy, not because life is easy, but because Christ is faithful.

(Light the third candle, rose/pink.)

Hymn: *Rejoice, Rejoice, Believers*

- ELW 244
- LBW 25
- LSB 515
- TLH 72

All Sing:

Rejoice, rejoice, believers, And let your lights appear; The evening is advancing, And darker night is near.

The Bridegroom is arising And soon is drawing nigh. Up, pray and watch and wrestle; At midnight comes the cry.

ADVENT 4 – THE CANDLE OF LOVE

(Matthew 1:18–25; Candle of Love)

Leader: His name is Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

People: We confess our sin, our helplessness, our dying.

Leader: His name is Emmanuel: God with us. Love has come in the flesh.

People: In our weakness, Christ abides. In our poverty, Christ gives himself.

Leader: We light the candle of Love, not to prove our devotion, but to proclaim God's presence.

(Light the fourth candle.)

Hymn: *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

- ELW 257
- LBW 34
- LSB 357
- TLH 62

All Sing (Refrain):

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to you, O Israel.

THE DAWN IS CERTAIN

Pastor Mark Anderson

We sit in the dark, pretending to see,
our lanterns gutter, our kindling spent.
We smear the ash upon our hands
and call it fire.
But the night whispers with a serpent's tongue:
"You are ended."

The law is a wall of black stone,
cold, sheer, unscaled.
Every ladder breaks,
every cunning plan lies in ruin.
Our silence weighs like the tomb of the fallen,
built from our own defeat.

Yet behold—
the East stirs.
A trembling light, pale as the first snow,
quivers upon the rim of the world.
Not summoned by our long waiting,
not earned by our prayers,
nor won by labor or willing—
But because *He* wills to come.

The dawn comes as gift, not payment;
as mercy, not debt.
No grave can bind it,
no shadow unweave it,
no doubt extinguish its flame.

The dawn is certain.
For the Cross has already burned
through the world's last midnight.
The stone-sealed mouth is opened,
its teeth shattered, its voice silenced.
Death itself is broken,
its dominion unmade.

Therefore lift up your empty hands—
for you cannot, need not, fashion the morning,
but you may receive it.
The Morning has hands of His own:
wounded yet risen,
strong enough to bear the weight of stars.

The light rises—
not ours to kindle,
but ours to behold.
He will give it.
He does give it.
He *is* the Dawn.
And the Dawn *is* certain.