

2025 Advent Study (Week 2)

“It’s Not What You Think”

-It was never going to be easy-

Text: Matthew 2:13-15

God bless our time in his Word during our midweek Advent services with both a greater understanding of the real Advent and a greater appreciation for what our Savior had to endure to do for us what he has. Amen.

The theme for our Midweek Advent services this year is: *“It’s not what you think.”* Our goal is to recognize a general misconception of the Advent of our Savior (what it was not) and then provide a realistic picture of what it really was – applying that reality to our own lives.

Last week our goal was to gain an accurate view of the actual world that Jesus entered, which was nothing like the clean, sterile, sweet-smelling image we have from movies, Christmas cards, and nativity scenes. The fact that Jesus entered the filthy mess that he did assures us that he does not and will not avoid our own personal messes. Jesus came into the world not to save the good and clean. He came to save sinners.

The second misconception we will address this evening, the second *“It’s not what you think”* was that the coming of Jesus, in fact the whole process of our redemption, was going to be easy. It was not, not by any stretch of the imagination. The text that will guide us this evening is found in the 2nd Chapter of Matthew’s Gospel.

^{ESV}(**Matthew 2:13-15**) *Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” ¹⁴ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.”*

This is God’s Word. We ask for the Holy Spirit’s guidance in our study this evening as we pray, **“Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth.”**

Everyone gets the appeal of movies. Not necessarily tragedies, where everyone dies, but the feel-good movies where the good guy wins and the bad guy gets what he deserves. I get that. It scratches the “justice

itch” – that thing in us where we long to see justice prevail in a world where it so often does not.

Last week we looked at how movies tend to mask the realities of Jesus’ day, making everything seem a whole lot cleaner, tidier, and well-organized than it actually was. This evening we identify a different problem – the apparent ease or simplicity by which real-life problems are solved.

Even if inadvertently or “without aforethought or malice”, the film industry promotes the idea that even the toughest problems in life are easily and quickly solved. Protracted marriage problems, rebellious teenagers, addictions, unwed motherhood, you name it. All can be solved in half an hour, or a two-hour movie, max. Again, we all get it. No one wants to watch a treasure hunting movie where the heroes never find any treasure and die bankrupt and disillusioned. No one wants to waste time and money watching an unresolved problem drag on without resolution. The problem is that the easy resolutions of make-believe can do a number on our concept of reality. They tempt us to become disillusioned when real-life isn’t like the movies.

One of the most common ways this twisted sense of reality shows itself is with questions that begin with, *“Why didn’t God just...”* The inclusion of the word “just” itself indicates an arrogance in the one asking the question. The obvious implication is that the questioner’s wisdom and problem-solving abilities exceed God’s own, since they recognize a solution that God himself apparently overlooked. The reality is that we can learn more from the fact that God *didn’t* than we ever could from answers to those *“Why didn’t God just...”* questions.

Jesus’ entry into our world began with intractable problems. From the very start, our Savior’s conception created problem for Mary and Joseph that we would be foolish to dismiss as simple. Mary’s joy at the news that she would have a child was continually tempered by the gossip that would certainly have surrounded her pregnancy. Don’t imagine that the people then were any different than they are today. Don’t imagine that they heard the story of the Immaculate (fatherless) Conception and simply believed what they were told. Don’t imagine that Joseph was not burdened by the ridicule of other men, who undoubtedly either ridiculed him as the husband of an adulterous wife or accused him of fathering a child out of wedlock and then lying about it. As would certainly be the case today, it’s

hard to imagine that anyone would have accepted their explanation of the angel's message and the divine genesis of the pregnancy.

Rather than question why God didn't arrange things so that Joseph and Mary could have avoided public ridicule and shame, we need to learn from the fact that he didn't. Could God have done things differently? Silly question. He's God. Of course he could have. The fact that he didn't teaches us not only to trust God's wisdom, even when we don't understand it, but to fully recognize and accept that obedience often comes at a cost.

Our text provides another example. It would be easy and, humanly speaking, natural to ask why God didn't just protect Mary and Joseph in place, without forcing them to flee. Why did Jesus, in whom resided the full power of God in bodily form, have to flee with his earthly parents? Why didn't the all-powerful God simply frustrate Herod's plan? Instead, the royal couple was forced to flee to a foreign country and to live as refugees. Again, we read those words as though they represent something simple, easy. Certainly they were anything but. Notice from our text how we read that Mary and Joseph took the child and fled by night. Note also how they were required to remain in that foreign country until Herod had died. So many questions. Why didn't God just end wicked Herod's life immediately? Why didn't God spare the children of Bethlehem? How could a loving and merciful God allow that to happen?

Answers are not found in the questions; they are found in the reality of the events as they actually unfolded. The answer to almost every *"Couldn't God have..."* question is *"Of course. He's God, but he didn't."* It's the height of foolishness to imagine that God must explain himself to his creation, just as it is pointless to imagine that we fallen mortals could ever grasp the full wisdom of God's actions. Our mandate is to trust his actions, and to obey.

That's such an easy assignment when everything goes the way we want and when things work out the way we imagine they should. That will work in heaven, where everything *will* be perfect. It doesn't work in a fallen creation – in an existence irreparably broken by man's sin.

Ask the question from a different perspective. What right do we have to dictate to God? What makes us imagine that our sense of the ways things ought to work in this life should direct the actions of the Creator of our universe? In Psalm 46 we are given divine guidance: ***"Come, behold the works of the LORD, how he has brought desolations on the earth. ⁹ He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks***

the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. ¹⁰ 'Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!' ¹¹ The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress."

Jesus' hardships certainly didn't end when his family finally moved back to Nazareth. That was just beginning, and things would get infinitely worse before they got better. The Bible reveals very little about Jesus' early life. In fact from birth to age 12 we know of only 5 events: his birth, the visit of the Magi, the flight to Egypt, the return to Nazareth, and his 12-year-old trip to the temple in Jerusalem for his dedication. While that's little enough, we know nothing specific at all from age 12 to age 30, when he began what we refer to as his public ministry. How easy, again, to skip lightly over that 18-year gap, foolishly assuming that that part of his life was easy for Jesus. True, he was not hunted by his human enemies during that time, but he certainly was by his infinitely more powerful unseen enemies. Remember that it was only an absolutely sinless life that Jesus could offer as an acceptable payment for sin. That means every moment of every single day of his life, including his youth, he had to be not just good but perfect. One slip, one sin, and all would be lost.

Does anyone seriously think that that would be easy? How would you fare? If God came to you today and told you that he would allow you into heaven if you could avoid all sin for just one week, how do you think that would work out for you? Not one wicked thought. Not one envious, covetous, or lustful glance. Not one slip of the tongue. Only that wasn't one week for Jesus. It was a 33-year ordeal. It was never going to be easy.

And then came the start of his earthly ministry. Human enemies were added to his demonic tormentors. He had to resist temptation not only from enemies but also from friends, allies, even his own family. Not even *they* believed him early on. Remember how his own half-brothers taunted him to go to the "big show" in Jerusalem to there prove that he was who he said he was. In effect: *"It's easy to be a big man and impress no-account Galileans. Go see what they think of you in Jerusalem."* His own family! It was never going to be easy.

And finally Gethsemane, his trial, and the cross – where he silently suffered for the sins of the entire world, abandoned even by his Heavenly Father.

Jesus knew when he left heaven that it wasn't going to be anything like easy. Yet, despite the fact that there was nothing at all for him to gain personally, he subjected himself anyway. Because there was no other way, let alone an easier way.

This is the lesson we need to learn. There is just no way around many of the hard things in this world, in this existence that we broke by our sin. In Gethsemane, Jesus asked his Father if there might be another way. The answer was no. It was never going to be easy. But just look at the result of simple obedience, even in the face of great suffering and hardship.

So also we ask our God to steel us for whatever lies ahead, confident of both his wisdom and his love. When hardship comes and God carries you through, as he will, recognize that far from abandoning you he was closer than ever – providing, protecting, carrying. Don't waste your time asking the unanswerable "*Why?*" Focus instead on humble, trusting obedience. Life will not always be easy, but God is always good. His Son Jesus is our irrefutable evidence, our indisputable proof. Amen.

The Weekly Meditation –

"It's Not What You Think"

Dec. 3: It was never going to be neat and clean

Dec. 10: It was never going to be easy

Dec. 17: It was never going to look like hope

The Third Hymn *(Posted on the Hymn Board and projected)*

The Prayers of the Day

The Lord's Prayer

The Benediction *(Spoken by the Pastor)*

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ

And the love of God the Father

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Congregation: *(Sung)* **Amen.**

The Closing Hymn *(Posted on the Hymn Board and projected)*

Silent Prayer



ADVENT 2025

"IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK"

- Please return this bulletin to the Entry Table to be used next week -

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Bismarck, ND**

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Midweek Advent Services – 2025

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn *(Posted on the Hymn Board and projected)*

Pastor: In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Congregation: Amen

P: The Advent mission of John the Baptist was to call the people to repentance. Applying that message also to ourselves, we confess our sins to God our Father, seeking His assurance of our forgiveness, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

C: Holy and merciful Father, I confess that I am by nature sinful and unclean, and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words, and actions. I have done what is evil and have failed to do what is good. For this I deserve your punishment, both now and in eternity. I confess my sins, repent of them, and trust in my Savior Jesus for forgiveness. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.

All (sung): Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. Lord have mercy upon us.

P: God, our heavenly Father, has been merciful to us and has given His only Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. By His command and authority, I assure each of you that your personal debt of sin has been paid in full. God, for Jesus' sake, has forgiven you.

All: Hymn 446 *(Stanzas 1-2)*

The Scripture Reading for the Day

(December 3) ^{ESV}(**Romans 8:18-25**) For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.

¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

(December 10) ^{ESV}(**John 16:15-22**) All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁶ "A little while, and you will see me no longer; and again a little while, and you will see me." ¹⁷ So some of his disciples said to one another, "What is this that he says to us, 'A little while, and you will not see me, and again a little while, and you will see me'; and, 'because I am going to the Father'?" ¹⁸ So they were saying, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We do not know what he is talking about." ¹⁹ Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, "Is this what you are asking yourselves, what I meant by saying, 'A little while and you will not see me, and again a little while and you will see me'? ²⁰ Truly, truly, I say to you, you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice. You will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will turn into joy. ²¹ When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. ²² So also you have sorrow now, but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.

(December 17) ^{ESV}(**John 14:23-29**) Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. ²⁴ Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me. ²⁵ "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. ²⁶ But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. ²⁷ Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. ²⁸ You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. ²⁹ And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe.

The Confession of Faith – (The Christmas Creed)

*I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Who sent His Son to be my Savior;*

I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son, my Lord, the long-promised Messiah, Who came as foretold, being conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, announced by the angels, worshipped by the shepherds, adored by the Wise Men, Who lived to suffer, die, and rise again, To free me from all sin, from death, and from the power of the devil;

*And I believe in the Holy Spirit, Who has brought me to faith in my Savior, and by whose continuous work in my heart, I rejoice in my salvation, walk in Christ, show forth His praises, and will one day live and reign with Him eternally.
Amen.*

The Second Hymn *(Posted on the Hymn Board and projected)*