

“The Meaning of Christmas: Through the Eyes of Our Need”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: December 24, 2023



On this particular Sunday morning, we are actually celebrating two things.

We are, of course, celebrating Christmas Eve, but it is also the fourth Sunday of Advent. Every few years, December 24th holds both Advent and Christmas.

So on this Sunday, that straddles Advent and Christmas, it seems appropriate to talk about the shift that we want to make today . . . to deliberately come out of Advent and to come into Christmas.

Many of us did not grow up celebrating Advent.

And many of us do not fully know what Advent is about.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation for Christmas, much like Lent before Easter.

But Advent is also the time and space that we hold the hard questions of life as we wait for God to come.

In the Northern Hemisphere, Advent is a time when physical darkness increases.

As the days shorten and the darkness lengthens, we tend to notice other kinds of darkness in the world . . .

the darkness of war and of suffering,

of death and of grief,

of loneliness and mental illness,

of political divisions and personal stress.

And the list could go on.

A minister friend once told me a story of a former parishioner of his. This parishioner made a point of speaking with him just after Thanksgiving to let him know that she would not be at church again until the new year. He said he would miss her and that he didn't realize that she would be going out of town for the month of December. "Oh, I am not going out of town," she replied. "I just can't stand being around all of the 'Merry Christmases' when I am in darkness at this time of year. I just find it easier to stay away."

In many ways that exchange between my minister friend and his parishioner, captures the questions and emotions we have about living in a world that is fallen and broken.

We can often feel the darkness as we read the news, as we look around at what is happening in the world, as we experience our own griefs and suffering, as we long to be loved and accepted and belong, as we experience the challenges of life.

Advent is the part of the church calendar that allows us to name the questions that come to people who are walking in darkness.

We sometimes wonder if the darkness is all that there is.

We sometimes wonder if love really is stronger than hate.

We sometimes wonder where God is and why God doesn't seem to be doing more.

The season of Advent makes room for the questioning and the wrestling and the waiting.

“The Meaning of Christmas: Through the Eyes of Our Need”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: December 24, 2023



The season of Advent helps us name our longing for a God who will tear open the heavens and come down.

But if Advent is the seasons of question, then Christmas is the resounding answer.

Christmas is the time when we marvel at the audacity of God to come as a human child into a broken and fallen world.

We scratch our heads and can't help but think . . . you really can't make this stuff up . . .

Who would EVER have guessed that the God of the All Creation would come to our neighborhood. as a mere babe!

How remarkable is it that the Creator who unleashed the Big Bang elected to come and save our broken world by putting on flesh and dwelling among us!

Christmas reminds us that God is on the move.

The Holy One has come to God's people walking in darkness.

The Lord of the All has come as Emmanuel, the name that literally means “God is with us.”

It is Jesus who stands as the answer to our Advent questions which can also be our every day questions.

When a voice whispers in our head . . . where is God?

We point to Jesus.

As Isaiah wrote — a child has been born FOR us and given TO us.

We remember that Jesus came as a child who would grow up and lay down His life for us in love.

This same Jesus is still at work in the world, creating His kingdom.

And when this kingdom is fulfilled, Jesus has promised to visibly come again and to proclaim the end of pain, of wars, of our sinfulness, of illness and disease, of suffering, and even of death.

When a voice whispers in our head . . . why is there so much darkness?

We point to Jesus.

We remember that Jesus, who called Himself the light of the world, has brought light and life into the darkness.

And we remember that the darkness has not overcome it.

When we feel lonely and alone— when we feel unloved in the deep places and rejected by others — when we are not sure where we belong . . .

We point to Jesus.

We remember the God who came in love — pure love — reckless love.

We remember the way Jesus loved God's people, making them family. — to God's people to invite them to be family and to give them belonging.

“The Meaning of Christmas: Through the Eyes of Our Need”

Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: December 24, 2023



My friends, God’s kingdom IS coming.
We pray for its coming every week in this place.
We pray using The Lord’s Prayer.
The kingdom IS coming . . . but it is not yet here.

And so we are living in the “not yet” . . .
Jesus is actively at work, but the full kingdom is “not yet” here.

As we wait in the “not yet,” we have a choice . . . we can focus on the “not” or the “yet.

If we focus on the “not” then we only see what is missing and listen to the voice that asks . . . “what kind of God still allows a broken world?”

OR we can focus on the “yet” . . .

Yes, the world is broken through human sin . . . and “yet” God came to us.

Yes, this world has darkness . . . and “yet” God has not forsaken us.

Like the parishioner, we know that it is often easier to stay away when things get hard . . . and “yet” God did not stay away.

Instead, Jesus came all the way down — into the brokenness — so we would not be alone, so we would have help, so we would know that God is faithful, so we would know that nothing stands between God’s love and us.

Our need for God is great!

And yet God has responded.

Jesus has come.

And He is the light and the life of the world.

We are not alone and God is bigger than anything we are facing . . . and that, my friends, is an audacious gift!