[Israel's Hope: On Your Journey To Bethlehem (An Advent Message)]

Advent, the beginning of the Worship Year in the Christian calendar, is the start of our journey toward the celebration that is Christmas. The Worship Year is a way that Christians have ordered their daily, weekly, and yearly spirituality around the Christ event, or Christ's coming in the *adventus* (Advent means "the coming"). We observe the Cycle of Light, which is Advent (*anticipation*), Christmas (*celebration*), and Epiphany (*proclamation*). We then round out the year observing the Cycle of Life, which is Lent (*anticipation*), Easter (*celebration*), and Pentecost/After Pentecost (*proclamation*). As Advent begins, we are each entering a new journey into the meaning, the heartbeat, of Christmas – and today we step across that starting line into the possibility of a fresh encounter with God in the Advent season.



The Theme Of Hope And The Jewish Nature Of Christmas

The theme of the first week in Advent, historically, has often been the theme of Hope – the confident expectation of good in one's future – and that is the theme I've chosen for today. Particularly, I've chosen the title, "Israel's Hope," because if we miss the essential Jewish nature of our Hope and the story that bears it to us, we miss the entire picture of how God has worked across all of recorded history to create a people for himself, and to bring us to the Savior of the world through that lineage of faith.

Hope in Christ must be a Hope rooted in the very Jewish Jesus, who the Father sent in to the world in a particular time, at a particular place, among a particular people, for a reason. This is called the "scandal of particularity" by theologians, as it is a preposterous, radical claim that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate, and truly the Son of God expressing his exact representation (Heb. 1:3) in detail to us. The Incarnation will always be a stumbling block to a world that must bend all stories to make them fit a self-centered universe.

For that reason, Advent truly celebrates a mystery – that God would choose to reveal Himself to humanity at a time, in a place, through a person. Without Jesus, you and I can walk out this door and believe anything we want. "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die," says the old adage. With Jesus, however, God lays a claim on your life and mine. He declares, "This is not a random universe; I have come to you in Christ to restore you and the world I so love to Myself (Jn. 3:16)." There's no moral soft ground, no blending of religions that satisfies this central thrust of the biblical narrative. All of history, all of time, had been leading up to Jesus. And all of it, once again, is leading to His eternal, loving reign over the world as we know it.

Christmas defies us to play church; rather it invites into the center of a story that is right now framing the lives of every person who has ever lived on planet earth.

Advent is anticipation, and it takes us deep into the Old Testament story of a people exiled from God, being brought home again and again by His tireless love. The story of God's people, the Jews, is in many ways our story.

ISRAEL'S HOPE (ON YOUR JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM)

Dan Wilt and Jeremy Dunn

Ancient times held a slaving people,
Yearning for deliverance;
Long deferred in their hope, grown weaker,
Hope is stirring in one small town

Truth and Grace, arrayed in straw
Israel's Hope, in a manger lay

Lift your eyes to the star before you,
On your journey to Bethlehem

Angels stride through the sky above you
Voices murmur in disbelief
Some they fall to the ground in worship
Others blinded by cynic schemes

Truth and Grace, arrayed in straw
Israel's Hope, in a manger lay

Steel your gaze on the star that guides you,
On your journey to Bethlehem

"House of Bread," no distinguished namesake
No great city to draw you on,
Humble streets lead her pilgrims homeward,
Bread of Life in her arms she holds

Truth and Grace, arrayed in straw
Israel's Hope, in a manger lay

Set your heart on the star above you,
On your journey to Bethlehem

Here you stand with the host around you,
All believing we see the stall;
"Come, Lord come" is our song united,
Lord of Life, we've come to call

Truth and Grace, arrayed in straw
Israel's Hope, in a manger lay

Find your faith robed in stars around you,
On your journey to Bethlehem

[Ichord chart | SATB choir lead sheet]

The Many Journeys Of Advent

The Christmas story is one filled with journeys, and no one who has ever entered the depths of faith in Jesus has not been on a *journey* to it.

You and I each have a Christmas journey we are on with Christ at this present moment. In the biblical narrative, Magi make an arduous journey across a desert following promises of foreign Scriptures and a celestial sign in the sky – a star. Shepherds are greeted with an angelic soundscape, and journey from the hills where they leave their flocks and vocations to find the promised One they'll been told about. Mary and Joseph journey from their hometown of Nazareth (and from their greatest fears of family embarrassment) to a small town called Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home. Bethlehem means "House Of Bread," and we all have a hunger that only Christmas can meet.

But all of these journeys I've mentioned begin with the shared journey of a man a named Jacob, who would become known as "Israel" – the namesake of a nation of people through whom God would send Christ the Victor into the world.

Jacob's journey is a long one, and we don't have time to get into all of it here. But it typifies the daily journey of life that you and I are on, and gives us keys to God's perfect plans to lead us to Himself through the ebb and flow of everyday life. Let's go to one point in Jacob's journey that will help us enter into the fullness of Advent this season, and ultimately into the fullness of experiencing Christ at Christmas.

Jacob's Journey

Jacob has been known as a problem child ever since the moment at his birth where he tried to beat his twin brother out of the womb by grabbing his ankle. Jacob means "he who grasps the heel," but later, when Jacob fools his father Isaac into giving him his blessing instead of Esau, his name takes on the meaning of "deceiver." He is a Momma's boy though, and his life is spared. So they send him away to find a wife and to get him away from his hot-tempered brother. After 14 years of hard labor, he has two wives, Leah and Rachel, and after 20 years he decides to take off secretly from his father-in-law's country to return home.

It's at this point we enter Jacob's story and its meaning for us today. Laban, Jacobs' father-in-law, thinks the Deceiver has stolen a few things on his exit, and is in hot pursuit of Jacob. Esau, Jacob's twin from whom he stole the blessing, is coming toward him with hundreds of men. Esau is the master of his future at this point, and if he's ever going to return home, he's going to have to do it through Esau.

Jacob is literally between his own rock and hard place. He is being pursued by his past (Laban) and his future (Esau) at the same time.

He is caught in the middle of his greatest fears, and he is about to find that God is not far from that place for any of us. Let's read from Genesis 32:22-30:

Gen. 32:22 That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. 23 After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. 24 So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. 25 When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man.
26 Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."
But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."
27 The man asked him, "What is your name?"
"Jacob," he answered.
28 Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome."
29 Jacob said, "Please tell me your name."
But he replied, "Why do you ask my name?" Then he blessed him there.
30 So Jacob called the place Peniel saying, "It is because I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared."

Jacob has run, feared, and fallen – right into the arms of God. He has a limp to show for his struggle, and as John Wimber once said, "Never trust a leader without a limp." He has seen God in his great trial, been broken, humbled, and blessed in the encounter, and has had his name changed to mark the moment forever. This blessing of God's love and favor, this new name, can never be taken from him.

Let's look at each stage in this short exchange between God and Jacob in order to see how Jacob's Hope, or Israel's Hope, can become our own.

1. Jacob Is Alone, As We All Must Eventually Be Before God

Jacob can no longer live through his father's faith, mother's faith, his spouse's faith, or his family's faith. Once he sends his family and all his possessions across the stream, it's all Jacob. He is alone, and he has nothing and no one to rely on in his dealings with God. And that night, without any props to hold him up, he meets God face to face.

For us, God will get us alone. No matter what we depend on, or who we live our lives vicariously through, God will create the environment where our props are kicked out from beneath us, and we are alone with him in the dark night of our lives. It's in those moments, when we think we've lost everything, that we gain the presence of God.

Are you alone with God on something right now? He wants you to know that's exactly where He wants you.

2. Jacob Wrestled With God, And Gained A Permanent Reminder Of His Sovereignty

Jacob enters the wrestling with God, and in so doing becomes the icon for all of our lives. In Jacob's struggle, caught between his uncertain past and his uncertain future, he exerts everything he has to remain in control. And just when his strength seems enough, he is broken by God. He is touched on the hip and is given a limp that will mark him the rest of his life. "Here comes limping Jacob," they will say, "He lost a wrestling match with God, and he'll never forget it. Neither, as we watch him, will we."

Losing with God, however, is not like losing with another person. When we lose our life, as Jesus said, we find it. When we lose with God, we gain a fresh revelation of how much he loves us, is for us, and we leave the reins of leadership in his capable hands.

Do you have a limp from the recent wrestling you've done with God? If so, He wants you to know it's a reminder that you need Him more than you ever have before. It's a reminder for you to depend on His strength, rather than your own.

3. Jacob Received A Name And A Blessing That Would Never Be Taken From Him

Jacob's past is completely altered by his name change. No longer is he the Heal-Grasper, the Father-Deceiver, or the Brother-Supplanter. He is no longer the old stories that he would rehearse in his mind, telling himself who he was. He is Israel – a man who has struggled with God and won just as he lost his life to God's purposes.

Wrestling with God always ends in a blessing. Wrestling with God always ends in a new name, a re-storied life, and a promise that He will never leave you or forsake you.

Israel's Hope Is Your Hope

Have you, like Jacob, struggled with God? There is a Peniel for you, a place of face to face encounter with the One who loves you more than any human being in this lifetime ever could, and that encounter is promised to those who stay the night with God.

This Advent season, God knows your wrestling, is with you in it, and plans to bless you and rename you on the other side of it. You may limp, like the rest of us, but that limp will remind you that God enters into your journey to lead you, to guide you, to form you into Christ, and to glorify His name through your weakness.

Our Hope this Christmas is not in our jobs, career moves, our vision for the new year, or our family ties. Our Hope this Christmas is in the God who gets us alone, wrestles with us, and leaves with the deposit of a face-to-face encounter that will mark us the rest of our lives.

Advent is another opportunity to reclaim our journey to Jesus, and to invite God to use any and all means to draw us into intimate friendship with Himself. It will be our own Peniel, our own face-to-face encounter, as pure and as true as that of the Magi, the Shepherds, and Mary and Joseph as they looked on the Savior of the world.

It's my prayer that encounter would await you in your own struggle, and that this Christmas would truly be the celebration of Immanuel, "God with us," as it was meant to be.

::

Bio: Dan Wilt, M.Min. is the creator of the Essentials In Worship Video Training Course for worship leaders and teams, and is the Founder of WorshipTraining.com, a media-training network of over 31K worship leaders and musicians. He serves as a worship leader in Franklin, TN, and has taught in Worship & Arts programs for schools like St. Stephen's University and Indiana Wesleyan. Dan is a songwriter, hymn writer, and author, and has served as a conference speaker globally. Dan works with his church family at Vineyard USA and Vineyard Worship in various support roles, and he, his wife Anita, and 3 young adult children live in Thompson's Station, TN. His ancient-future worship leadership blog offers weekly tools and team encouragements at DanWilt.com.