

As we come to this Advent season we are going to think of what it means that Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. Today we see that God with us brings hope. Next week we see that God with us brings love, week three shows that God with us brings joy and week four reminds us that God with us brings peace.

### **God with Us Brings Hope**

Have you ever heard those stories about someone lost at sea? In the summer of 2017, two longtime commercial fishermen—John Aldridge and Anthony Sosinski—set out to fish from Montauk, Long Island. As they headed out to sea, about forty miles offshore, Anthony was sleeping below deck while John started to get things ready for the catch they would soon begin to haul in. He was pulling on a handle with all his might when it snapped, sending him sprawling backward—and right off the back of the boat.

The boat was on autopilot, so it just kept cruising. As soon as he resurfaced from under the water, John began screaming for help even though he knew there was no way Anthony would ever hear him. And Anthony did not hear him.

John watched the boat go up and over the crest of a wave, and then it was gone. Like that, he couldn't see it anymore. He was alone, treading water in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, without a life vest, thinking this was the way he was going to die.

Can you imagine what that must have felt like? If there's ever been a hopeless situation, that has got to be it.

Or is it?

While John was trying to calm down, quiet his thoughts of certain death, and stay afloat, he realized that his boots were very buoyant. And he got an idea. He took one off, emptied it out, and plunged it back into the water so that it created an air pocket. It did. And it floated. So John stuck his boots under his arms as flotation devices.

At least he could stay afloat. A flicker of hope.

John thought of his family and the fact that no one, anywhere, even knew that he was missing. He tried to set goals, beginning with just living till morning.

Four hours later, Anthony woke up and realized John was gone. He called the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard began its search procedures, even though the Coast Guard commander admitted he didn't have much hope of finding John in so much open water.

On the boat, Anthony found the broken handle and knew what John must have been doing when he went overboard—which also meant he knew the ocean depth of where he would have been doing it.

John made it alive to morning and tried to keep his hope alive. But the hours kept passing, and there was no sign of help. Finally he spotted a fishing buoy and was able reach it and climb onto it. This was a new surge of hope.

In less than an hour a Coast Guard helicopter flew nearby and spotted John waving and splashing. They pulled him up to safety.

Miraculously, John Aldridge survived. What an amazing story! And what amazing hope! If it were most of us out there bobbing alone in the middle of the ocean, we probably would have given up hope that there was even a chance—a sliver of a chance—to survive.

But hope is like that. Hope is the whisper that maybe, maybe these boots will float if I turn them upside down.

What is hope in your life?

For some, hope is the first candle to be lit when the power goes out in the storm.

Hope is the first day you wake up and can breathe again after an awful cold. And hope is that percentage you *do* have of beating the cancer.

Hope is the faint line on that stick when you've been struggling to get pregnant.

It's the first ray of sunshine through your window after a tearful, difficult night.

Hope is hearing the words, “He’s going to be OK.”

Hope is the flicker of *maybe, just maybe*.

Hope is the fuel of faith and dreams.  
And hope is what we celebrate on this first Sunday of Advent.

## Entering Advent

Advent is actually a season of hope. The word *advent* means “coming” or “arrival,” and the season is marked by expectation, waiting, anticipation, and longing. Advent is not just an extension of Christmas—it is a season that links the past, present, and future. Advent offers us the opportunity to share in the ancient longing for the coming of the Messiah, to celebrate His birth, and to be alert for His second coming. Advent looks back in celebration at the hope fulfilled in Jesus Christ’s coming, while at the same time looking forward in hopeful and eager anticipation to the coming of Christ’s kingdom when He returns for His people. During Advent we wait for both—it’s an active, assured, and hopeful waiting.

In a season often marked by frenzied busyness, Advent is an opportunity to set aside time to prepare our hearts and help us place our focus on a far greater story than our own—the story of God’s redeeming love for our world. It’s not a season of pretending or covering over—it is a season of digging deep into the reality of what it means that God sent His Son into the world to be Immanuel, God with Us. It is a season of expectation and preparation, an opportunity to align ourselves with God’s *presence* more than just the hectic season of *presents*. So wherever you are on your own spiritual journey, I invite you into this season. It’s a time that allows for questions and struggle as we take time to prepare our hearts for Christ’s coming.

Advent is not a celebration that God comes to fix things—from broken computers to broken families to broken and hurting lives. Rather, simply, Advent is a celebration that God comes. God comes to be with us. He is the God with Us. In the darkness, in the pain, in the chaos, He comes. And He makes a way.

## The Long Journey of Hope

That's the way God has been working throughout history. You see, back in the beginning, in the way God intended this creation, He walked freely and openly with Adam and Eve. He was with us, and humanity enjoyed wholeness and intimacy with God.

But you know the story. Adam and Eve chose sin. Separation divided God and humans. The brokenness of our world that we know far too well is the ongoing result.

But do you realize that ever since, God has been working toward restoration and healing and wholeness for us and all He has made? This is the overall story of the Bible. Throughout it, we can see God making a way and giving and reminding His people of hope that He is still at work.

We see it in God's covenant with Abraham, then called Abram: "*All peoples on earth will be blessed through you*," God promised in Genesis 12:3.

When God encountered Jacob at Bethel, He renewed that covenant and reinforced the hope rooted in His faithfulness: "*I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you*" (Genesis 28:15).

But much time passed, years and generations and centuries, and we humans are an impatient breed. "How long, O God?" was the cry of the ancient Israelite people. From the times of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to David, Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the many other prophets, there was a repeating history of devotion to God and neglect of God. There was prosperity and there was recession, feast and literal famine, pleasure and pain. The Hebrew people weren't much different from us. When things got good, they tended to forget about God. When things got bad, they cried out for God's help again.

But through it all, there was a deep and ongoing longing for God to fulfill His covenant and His promise of a Messiah, who would come to make everything right. This wasn't just a happy idea that drifted in and out of the Israelites' consciousness and culture—this was a deep hope, their deepest hope, that sustained them and

encouraged them and spurred them on, especially through thousands of years of uncertain waiting.

In the midst of that long journey of hope, Isaiah is what Bible scholars call a major prophet. He wrote a lot and taught a lot and played a prominent and public role in Israel. He was a famous guy in his day, though not always popular, especially when he was telling kings and the general public things they didn't want to hear, like "*God doesn't like the way you're cheating poor people*" or "*An enemy empire is going to invade and destroy your country.*"

But you might say Isaiah is the poster prophet for Advent, this season of longing, expecting, and hoping for God to be with us. Through Isaiah, God gave Israel and us many prophecies and promises about the Messiah He would send. And in that way, Isaiah was a voice of hope.

Isaiah lived seven hundred years before Jesus, but he gave us beautiful words that ring with hope for the coming Messiah. Listen to some of these:

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel”  
Isaiah 7:14.

“Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the nations, by the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan—The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned” (Isaiah 9:1–2).

A little later in the same chapter, Isaiah wrote:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and

forever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this" (Isaiah 9:6–7).

Can you imagine living in an ancient world, well before the time of digital or even much written information, and hearing a message like that? Can you imagine the hope that would spring in the people's hearts?

Did Isaiah understand all of these messages and promises? On some level, yes, but on others, probably not. He sure didn't know God's time line for when it all would happen and when the Messiah would come. Perhaps Isaiah thought it would be in his lifetime, or maybe he was wise enough to know that God's work stretched for generations and generations. But Isaiah was filled with hope, and God's promises fuelled him and his people to continue to hope for years and centuries. His vision of God with Us still fuels hope inside of us millennia later.

As we turn our attention to the Christmas story in Luke, Zechariah would have been well acquainted with the words and prophecies of Isaiah. He was a priest; Luke described him as righteous and blameless. He was a good Jewish follower of God and a spiritual leader to his people, and he undoubtedly held deep longings for the Messiah who had been promised.

But Zechariah was still in shock when suddenly, out of the blue, on an ordinary day when he was going about his priestly duties, God dropped a megadose of hope into Zechariah's world for the people of Israel.

Picture it. It's been four hundred years since Israel has had a clear prophetic voice and message from God. Four hundred years! Think about how long that is. To give a comparison for us, about four hundred years ago, Johannes Kepler, the famous scientist, was discovering his planetary laws. North America was still to be explored by Europeans. The Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand 2<sup>nd</sup> imposed religious uniformity on all of his lands – everyone had to convert to Catholicism – started 30 years war! James 1 and 6 is the king. So a

long, long time ago, with many lives come and gone in between, but close enough in time that things are recognizable in our knowledge.

So when an angel showed up and told Zechariah that he would have a son who “*will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord*” (Luke 1:17), Zechariah knew the significance. He knew the prophecies of the Messiah. And he also knew that this was a miraculous occurrence all the way around.

See, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were old. Too old to have kids. And this was a big deal for them. In those times, it was shameful, especially to the woman, not to be able to have kids. Zechariah and Elizabeth would have wanted to have children. They would have tried to have children and hoped and prayed to God to bless them with children. But it never happened for this couple. Even though they were well thought of, especially Zechariah as a good priest, the fact that they were childless would have been a stigma on them—an asterisk in people’s minds. “Oh, you know Zechariah and Elizabeth?” people might have said. “Good people, but they never had any children.”

“Oh, yes, such a shame,” others might have answered with a knowing, slightly condescending tone.

So when Zechariah received a special angelic delivery, he was a little bit in shock, to say the least. And he couldn’t quite get over this part about him and his old wife having a child. “Who me? Uh, we’re old, God. That’s not possible,” was his response. As a result, God made sure Zechariah remained literally speechless until his son, John, was born.

This was certainly an inconvenience, but can you imagine the hope that sprang up within this couple and the people around them when they heard this news? The old prophecies are about to be fulfilled! The one prophesied to come in the spirit of Elijah to prepare the way for the Messiah is coming! God is moving to restore hope that He is still here—that the human expression of God with Us is still

coming. That God is about to stir things up and change eternity forever!

Hope in Israel was alive again! Hope on earth at its deepest levels was alive again!

Maybe some of you are thinking, *That's all nice and great for those people thousands of years ago, but what about for us? What about for me? They weren't fighting cancer. Their father didn't walk out on them. Their mother wasn't an alcoholic. They didn't lose their job with no warning, with bills to pay and debts stacking up and kids expecting Christmas presents, not to mention meals on the table.*

No matter what (there is always hope picture) kind of problems and struggles you are facing right now, no matter what kind of season of darkness and pain you are in, let me encourage you not to abandon hope. Hope is still alive, even in our deepest pain and most hopeless circumstances. Hope is alive because God is with us.

How can we know? How can we find that tiny spark of hope when we're on the verge of giving up?

I think there are several ways that all of us can kindle and reconnect with God's hope during this Advent season, no matter what kind of circumstances we are facing.

### **Hope Based on God's Word**

The first is hope based on God's Word. Part of God with Us is the written word that He has left us. These are His promises to His people—both long ago and today. They are a piece of Him. They are beacons of hope. They are reminders that can penetrate our hearts and spirits and assure us that no matter what we are facing, no matter how bleak tomorrow looks, no matter how bad the pain, God will never leave us or forsake us. And nothing can separate us from Him.

Consider these words from Psalm 139: “*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.*

*If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’ even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you”* (Psalm 139:7–12).

Can you feel the hope in those words? You are not alone. God with Us means that He always will be with us, and nothing—nothing—can take that away.

Scripture is filled with stories and words and promises that can rekindle a supernatural hope within us. As we move through Advent, let me encourage you to dig into the words of the Bible expectantly. Because God is with us, we can take hope that we are never alone, that He is always working in and among us, and that He is not done yet with His greatest and final work of healing.

### **Hope Based on God’s Character**

The second way we can rekindle hope is to put our focus on God’s character—on who He is and promises to be.

There’s a small story told in the book of Mark (Mark 5:25–34) that is easy to overlook, but it’s a great story of hope. It’s about a woman—we don’t even know her name—with a bold hope.

For twelve years, this woman had been bleeding somehow. No one had been able to help her. Doctors had tried, but the woman’s condition had only grown worse. This was a condition that would have affected everything about her, every day of her life. Those of you with long-term illnesses can probably relate. This woman was probably considered unclean and treated as an outcast because of her health problems. Even people who might try to understand her problem couldn’t. She didn’t understand it herself.

But she had heard about this Jesus—the stories, the miracles, the healings—and she believed. Hope awoke inside of her. The hope of healing, the hope of a new life, drove her to take action.

*If I can just get close enough to touch His clothes, I’ll be healed,* she thought. *If this Jesus is who He says is, He can heal me.*

It was a bold hope she held. It may seem like a small action to us, but she did what she could just to get close enough to Jesus and reach out. When she did, it made all the difference in the world.

Was it hard? Probably. Jockeying her way through the noisy, clamouring crowd must have been difficult, especially with a long-term illness, especially if she was stigmatized and looked down upon. Was she afraid? Yes, especially when Jesus began looking for her in the throng of people.

“Who touched me?” Jesus asked.

“What do you mean, ‘Who touched me?’” his disciples asked.  
“We’re in the middle of a crowd.”

The woman must have frozen in that pregnant, powerful second. On the one hand, she knew that she had been healed miraculously. On the other, was she about to pay a harsh penalty for her presumption?

“Um, it was me,” she said timidly, fearfully.

And Jesus connected with her deeply and directly, as God with Us. And the healing, peace, and freedom He gave her changed her life.

This is our God. This is His character. Jesus is worthy. He was and still is God with Us. He fulfilled Israel’s hope for the Messiah when He arrived that first Christmas. He fulfilled humanity’s hopes for victory over death when He resurrected that first Easter. And one day He will ultimately fulfil all hope and complete God’s work of restoration for all creation.

This is the promise He left us with to give us a foundation of confidence and boldness: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). This is a promise worthy to fuel our hope. Because God is true to His character, because of who He is, we can take hope in Him.

### **Hope Based on God’s Faithfulness**

The third way we can find and choose hope is by focusing on God’s faithfulness.

How has God worked in your life? What are those moments and memories when you have experienced God’s work in your life? You

know those times when you had no doubt He was there and He was working. Maybe it's been recently. Maybe it's been a long time ago. But in those circumstances swirling around you, the presence of God's Spirit was with you.

What does that have to do with hope? What do those memories have to do with your here and now?

Gratitude breeds hope. Thankfulness fosters hope. Acknowledgment and appreciation bring hope.

Listen to these words from Jeremiah found in Lamentations, a book most of us may not spend too much time reading: Lamentations 3:21–26 “*Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the LORD’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, ‘The LORD is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.’ The LORD is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD.*”

Did you catch that at the beginning? “Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope.” Jeremiah understood that there is hope in the future when we remember what God has done in the past.

He knew that hope sparks like a fire. It flows like water. It grows like a seed. Hope grows and spreads like a living thing. It can dwindle and wane and, yes, even die. But with nurture and care, it can revive and flourish and multiply.

Focusing on gratitude can renew and grow our hope. Recognizing and appreciating the good that God has shown us in the past can increase our hope for all He will do in the future. Sharing this gratitude and hope with those who love and support us can multiply its effects. As we nurture this living hope, it can sustain us through our darkest days as we wait for God to move.