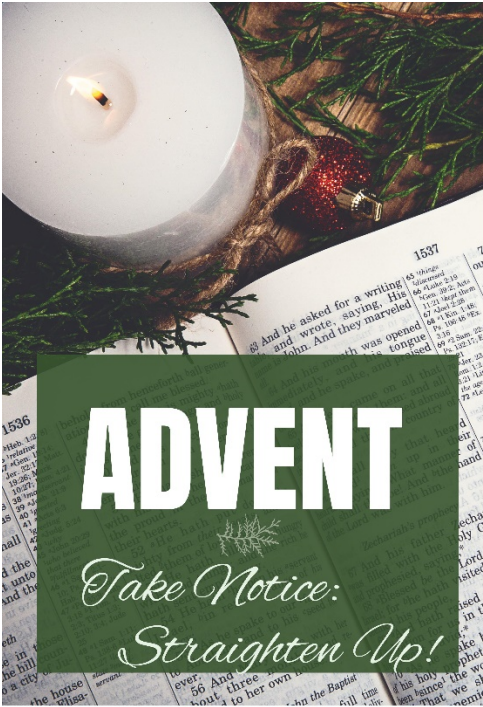


## ADVENT NOTICE: STRAIGHTEN UP!



**What do YOU tell others about the season of Advent?** As a pastor, I have always wondered what my church family was saying about the sacred season of Advent outside the church walls. Yes, there was always excitement about decorating the church in all its festive glory; there always seemed to be a spirited discussion about what Advent candle to light and when (conjuring up memories of how the previous pastor did it differently), and there was an urgent preparation for the year's children's worship service. But when it came to celebrating the beginning of a new church year, attending midweek Advent worship, picking up the Advent devotions and focusing on preparing hearts and minds for the coming of the Lord – **well, not so much.** Many churches don't even attempt midweek services anymore because everyone is so busy this time of year and only a smattering of members would attend if they did hold them. Tragic, isn't it?

I would love to know if any of my church family ever shared at the water cooler at work or in line at the grocery store: **Don't you just love the season of Advent? God tells us all to "Straighten up" and He means it!** John the Baptist sought to prepare the hearts and minds of people for the coming of Christ with the message to "Repent" and Jesus Himself clearly tells us in Luke 21:28, *"Now when these things begin to take place, **straighten up** and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."* I don't know about you, but it has never crossed my mind that Jesus really didn't mean what He said. As we start another new church year, give it the notice it deserves! God has a message for you - but also for your mission field where you work, play and serve: take notice – straighten up! Raise your heads! God is at work to bring you His salvation. And nothing (yes, nothing!!) is more important. Be encouraged and inspired to make this new church year different. **Read more** about the notice God is giving you to equip you for the new church year and eternity as well!

### How seriously do YOU heed a notice?

We're all wired differently. And this truth could never be more poignant than how we heed a notice or respond to a warning. When the engine warning light pops up on your dashboard, do you immediately schedule a service appointment, or do you keep driving the car until it stops? When you get a notice to renew your subscription, do you respond immediately or wait until you no longer receive an issue - and then call to see what's up? We all tend to respond in many different ways.

Early in December, a resident of a New York apartment building opened the door to her apartment and found that a greeting card had been slipped under the door. "Merry Christmas from the staff of the North Avenue Apartments," it read. "That's nice," she thought. She put the card on the stack of her other cards and forgot about it. But inside the card was her rent notice for December. A week later, she came home and found another card under her door. This one said, "Merry Christmas from the staff of the North Avenue Apartments - Second Notice!"

Have we taken notice that Advent is not merely just another passing season but a call to repentance - a notice from God Himself? James and his wife went to the funeral of cousin Billy at the little country church down the road. But the service wasn't what they expected. The preacher was to the point - "It's too late for Billy. He might have wanted to believe. But he can't now." James leaned over to his wife and whispered, "This is terrible. How can this be of comfort to anyone?" The preacher continued to bear down - "You need to repent now! It's not too late for you." On the drive home, James continued to complain: "That was the most insensitive, manipulative, and inappropriate funeral sermon I have ever heard. Who would ever attend that church?" Choosing her words carefully, his wife said, "Yes, it was insensitive, manipulative and inappropriate. And the worst part of it all...**it was all true!**"

### **Straighten up means straighten up - doesn't it?**

When my father said my full name and shouted, "Straighten up," I knew exactly what he meant. I never would respond, "Just for clarification, you mean..." My father's message was simple, clear, and direct - I was doing something wrong, and I needed to change my ways. I needed to stop, turn around, and straighten up my life. One time after receiving a rather harsh rebuke and punishment, I wanted to immediately repent of my wrongdoing. But I couldn't find my father. My mother told me now is not a good time. I pushed a bit more because I really wanted to tell Dad that I was sorry, and it won't happen again. My mother simply said, "Your father doesn't want you to see him cry. He truly mourns having to ever punish you, but he loves you too much to have you continue doing what you're doing." Those words struck to the core of my heart more than any punishment or grounding could do.

I still regret never telling my father that his relentless love, even when it was to tell me to "straighten up" or even to discipline me, changed my life - for the better. I believe Advent worship is our opportunity to thank God for His advent into our lives because He loves us too much to leave us in our sin with its condemnation and eternal separation from Him. God sent His Son not only to take our punishment but to give us the free gift of redemption. His Advent message calls for a necessary change in our lives. But not only for us, but for the world with which we have opportunity to share His saving and changing Word.

One of the towering marks of our day and age is the absence of guilt. Everyone has a justification for the wrong they have done. We're innocent until proven guilty, right? Therefore,

our innocence is based on our own relevant truth. This “heart condition” of our society makes it difficult to talk about repentance. For if there is no feeling of guilt for sin or any wrongdoing, then the need for repentance is greatly minimized, if not altogether eliminated. But the message of Advent is “Repent! Straighten up!” The Advent message is simple, clear, and direct. We are all sinners, every single one of us, and we need to change our ways. We need to stop, repent, and straighten up our lives.

### **Thank God for the sacred season of Advent.**

The season of Advent isn't here to prepare us to welcome the Child born in the manger. He came for us in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago. Advent is to prepare our hearts and minds to welcome our Lord when He daily comes to us in Word and Sacrament, Law and Gospel. We need to welcome the Law even when it's not as “Christmassy” as would like: straighten up, stay awake, watch, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We also need to be prepared for the coming of the Lord in glory. The Lord, who first came to us as an infant, will come again as King and Judge. And for that Day, we need a simple, clear, and direct message from God. For that Day, we need repentance. For that Day, we need to *straighten up!* Not a single one of us is exempt from this message. Yes, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

I get it. That message doesn't foster chestnuts roasting on an open fire or carols flowing from our lips. But it does stir up our hearts. It should! God's message is certainly a bit more serious than the ol' “*he's making a list and checking it twice!*” We don't always turn away from sin, and even when we do, old habits, bad habits, die hard. (That reminds me. “Die Hard” is definitely a Christmas movie. But I digress.) The truth is that we don't always produce the good fruit, the good works, our Lord expects. It's much easier to love ourselves than to love others; to serve and help ourselves instead of serving and helping others. It just comes naturally to us to lash out in anger when we're hurt, to return evil with evil, and repay injury with injury. (Just watch the news for 30 minutes.) It's easier to cut people down rather than build them up, to put off our Lord rather than worship Him, to get wrapped up and consumed by our own very busy lives.

Simply put, it's hard to straighten up! It's just so much easier to let things be as they are, to turn a blind eye, to ignore the problems, to not stir the pot. So thanks be to God for the message of Advent. Not only to *stir up* our hearts, but to *smash* our cold, hard hearts with the hammer of His Law! Not only do we personally need to hear this truth, but so does the entire world including “our own world” where God has placed us. **Would it hurt to share a little Advent truth where you live?** That would never work, you say? Who would listen? People flocked, (yes, like rushing the field after your team's victory - flocked) to hear John the Baptist preach God's Advent truth.

## **God's Advent Word provides the powerful opportunity to change.**

As you listen to the first two weeks of Advent texts: Luke 21:25-36 and Luke 3:1-14, do you wonder why people flocked to come out to hear Jesus and John the Baptist? They weren't sharing all sorts of warm fuzzies. But the Advent message was the exact opportunity people had been looking for. Yes, the message was one of judgment, but in the judgment was opportunity. **And the opportunity is wrapped up in the word, "repent."**

"Repent, the Kingdom of heaven is at hand!" With the opportunity for repentance, John was telling the people that they didn't have to remain like they are. We don't have to be held captive by our failures, our past, or our inadequacies. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we can repent – make a 180 degree return to God. We can and need to get rid of the past. God's saving grace means we can actually start over. Advent then is a second notice of a blessed opportunity to be changed by God and His coming to us. We assume that no one would flock to hear this Word of God. But frankly, His Word is exactly the opportunity they need whether they know it or not.

The truth may not be easy to hear. The truth of God is unsettling to our sinful lives. And it should be. For the sad truth is that more often than not, you and I don't produce the good fruit of repentance our Lord expects. Our heads are bent in self-pity and despair. We don't love God with all our heart and soul and strength, much less love our neighbors as ourselves. Despite our best efforts, there are those we have hurt and those we have failed to help. Our thoughts and desires, our words and deeds, are soiled with sin. There is nothing good within us in our sinful condition. You and I are laid low by the hammer of God's Law so that we might be lifted up and comforted by the Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus, His Son.

The truth demands change. The way of the Lord is the way of repentance which by its very meaning involves change. It's a change of heart and mind, **which only God can work within us by the power of His Spirit working through Word and Sacrament - His daily adventing into our lives.** Advent is our Second Notice to straighten up - but the straightening up is God's construction work to get our hearts and lives on the straight and narrow, clean out our messed-up lives so cluttered with sin, littered with shame and death, so that we might be filled to overflowing with the righteousness of Christ instead.

## **Just when you thought construction season was over - here comes Advent.**

Even when winter causes the halt of road construction and the digging of foundations, the season of Advent proclaims that God's work continues. John the Baptist proclaims the construction work only God does. First, **raise the valleys:** where are we living below God's best for us? Every one of us has parts of our lives that are sunk down. We've all sinned and fall short of God's glory. The truth is that we don't measure up to God's perfect standard but

do we recognize that there is blessing in repenting of it so God can lift us up and fill in these low places? These low places may come about as a result of neglect of our spiritual lives, neglect of our family, unconfessed sin, hurt, and held grudges. We are called to confess these low places so that God can build us up by filling in our low places with His grace and love.

**Level the hills:** What are the resistant areas of our lives? The mountains and hills are the obstacles to the knowledge and presence of God that prevent Him from coming to us in all His fullness. These are things like pride, unbelief, resistance to the Holy Spirit, self-will, self-effort, self-righteousness, a critical spirit of others and such things. Most often we can't even see the high places in our lives much less repent of them. The only way they are dealt with is in brokenness, submission, and humility before God. In this heart-felt repentance, God clears away the obstacles so that He can come to us in full sight.

**Make the crooked paths straight:** Where are our priorities out of whack? If we could look down the roads we've taken in life, it would reveal one curve after another as we've chased after this thing or that thing, slowly meandering toward something we're not certain of. There are thousands of great opportunities for us to pursue, but have we repented of our plans and paths and asked God to lead us down the path He has for us? When God puts before us a path, it isn't to be one of many but THE one we desire with all our heart. The filter for our priorities is always God's Word - put your dreams, purpose, mission statement, and financial portfolio over against the Word and then let God alone be your Guide.

**Make the rough places smooth:** Where are the inconsistencies in your life? Where are the uneven places of our thoughts, words, and deeds that cause people to wonder, "They call themselves Christians?" Are we consistent with what we pray for and what we do? These inconsistencies make it rough and lead to a great deal of hurt. We know better, but we refuse to change even when confronted by the Word of God. These rough places are not leveled through self-effort but only by the work of the Holy Spirit. As we repent of our sin, we pray for Him to replace our inconsistent sinful words and deeds with the Spirit-directing grading of our journey in life where Christ lives in and through us. *"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me"* (Galatians 2:20).

**Evangelism is simple, clear, and sometimes direct: God alone saves!**

God gives us this Advent promise: He will complete the work He has begun (Philippians 1:6). Of all the preparations - the road construction - that are needed, we can be confident that the most important preparations are those that are in God's hands. Our God comes to us to tear down any obstacle between us and Him with the news of God-in-the-flesh coming to be born to die on the cross to remove those obstacles, to fill in every pot hole to overflowing with the grace which flows from His Baptismal promise; He will straighten the blind curves in our attitudes and the twisting ways in our behavior with the power of His Spirit working in the Word;

and He will smooth over those rough inconsistencies with His peace and guiding light. The repentance we bring before God allows Him to continue His work in our lives so He can bring to completion His saving grace in our lives.

What does this mean for your life? The life of your family? The lives of those around you? It is different for everyone except in the truth that joy and repentance are two sides of the same coin. If we truly hear God's Word and sincerely repent, we would then ask the same question as the crowd: "What should we do then?" What is our response to the message of repentance? The fruits of repentance are not an effort to earn being rescued from our sin but rather a concrete, practical evidence that our lives have been touched - and changed - by God's mercy and grace. John gave different instructions to his hearers: to the tax collectors who were notorious for overcharging the people, the fruit of repentance meant to work honestly; and, to the soldiers, who often misused their authority, the fruit of repentance meant to be content and refrain from using their authority for personal gain.

God has begun His gracious work in us - thanks be to God! Just as I didn't see my father's tears when he called me to "straighten up", sometimes we fail to see our Heavenly Father's love in His desire to change us from our sinful ways. Redemption is near in the presence of our Ever-present Savior. There is joy in our repentance, because in it, we are allowing God to shape and complete our lives according to His will. What a gracious opportunity - a second notice! The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand! Bearing the fruit of repentance will keep Christmas - Christ's coming to us - for the whole year long, not just for a few days in this one.

The Evangelization Team is praying that you have a blessed Advent season. And yes, we are praying for the Holy Spirit to work His construction on your heart and lives. We are also praying that the Holy Spirit will accompany your every thought, word, and action to boldly proclaim that God alone saves. He not only calls for us to "straighten up" but He does the work to finish the job. This urgent message is at the heart of evangelism - our God loves us too much to leave us in our sin and condemnation but instead has completed everything necessary for salvation in Him. How can we not share this urgent message to a dying and broken world?

We would love to hear from you the answer to the question at the beginning of this article: **What do YOU tell others about the season of Advent?** You can share your answers with us at the email [evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org](mailto:evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org) Thanks be to God that He sent His Word to us to change our lives for eternity. May we be so bold *and caring to the world around us*, to share His Word.

In Christ Alone,  
Pastor John Diener  
Galatians 2:20