



“Voices of Advent”

By Professor Matthew L. Skinner

Session 1: The Voice of Jesus (November 23, 2025)

Introduction

Opening Questions:

- When, each year, do you start decorating for Christmas or listening to Christmas music?
- How much distinction between Christmas and Advent do you draw? Your family? Our congregation?
- Do you have a favorite Advent-specific tradition? If so, what is it? Why?

Advent means “arrival” or “coming” (from the Latin, *adventus*).

Advent focuses on Jesus’s coming as a baby (in history), in our present experience (in mystery) and when God makes all things new (in majesty).

Advent was originally a fast to prepare for the feast of Christmas. Pope Gregory I (d. 604 AD) set ***Advent’s*** length as four weeks; previously churches in different places observed it for different lengths of time. Although Christians did not widely observe Christmas until the 4th century, Christian authors as early as Justin Martyr (d. 165 AD) understood a connection between Jesus’s birth and future return.

“Our Christian ancestors through the centuries have found value in treating the season (of Advent) as more than a countdown to December 25...By turning our attention to Jesus’s presence – past, present, and future – Advent infuses in us Christ-centered perspectives about God’s commitment to the world and about the meaning of our lives.” - Matthew Skinner

- Thinking about past experiences of Advent, where has the season’s emphasis mostly fallen for you: Jesus’s past coming, continued presence, or future coming? Why?
- How, if at all, would you like to experience Advent differently? Why?

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, who is and who was and is coming, you have promised a new reality is on the way, a reality in which all life flourishes as you created it to. In the birth of Jesus, you have proven your faithfulness and your will to be with us. As we study your Word in this season of waiting, may your Spirit move us to more fully trust your commitment to us and to the world by more fully entrusting ourselves to you. Amen.

Session 1 Video – “The Voice of Jesus”

- Which of Skinner’s statements most interested, intrigued, surprised, or confused you? Why?
- What questions does this video segment raise for you?

“Waiting for God to Show Up”

- When and why can waiting be easy? When and why can it be difficult?
- Do you think of waiting as mostly passive or mostly active? Why?

- How is waiting for *Christ* different than waiting for *Christmas*?

“Advent is a season of waiting, but it’s not a season of pointless waiting...In Advent we extol the importance of active, even insistent waiting...The church grows fidgety, expecting something to happen. We’re asking God to show up. Actually, we’re imploring God.” – Matthew Skinner

- When, if ever, did you ask or implore God to show up? What happened?
- Skinner says one form of active waiting is “internal housecleaning” – taking stock of and owning up to our shortcomings. When was a time you recognized, willingly or unwillingly, a shortcoming? What did this recognition lead you to do? To what extent is this kind of introspection a regular part of your spiritual practice?
- Skinner quotes an Advent sermon by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in which Bonhoeffer calls God’s coming “frightening news for everyone who has a conscience” before it is good news, claiming we can only recognize the “incomparable kindness” of God’s coming after experiencing its potential terror. Do you agree?
- Active, insistent Advent waiting “entails a hunger to see things change and a willingness to get involved.” When considering the world’s shortcomings, where do you hunger most for things to change? How are you involved in efforts to make those changes?
- “God wants to be with us. God will be with us. Those are massive claims that should cause us to reassess our tremendous value in God’s estimation.” How does God’s will to be with humanity shape the way you think and feel about other people? About yourself?

“Parousia and Apocalypse”

Parousia – Greek word meaning “arrival” or “appearance”. This term is not new or unique to the New Testament. It could mean “the manifestation of god or, more commonly, a visit from a dignitary.”

Parousia is highly visible. The New Testament frequently calls Jesus’s future return his *Parousia*.

- When you hear the word, **apocalypse**, what do you think of?

Apocalypse – derived from the Greek word *apocalypse*, means not a specific disaster but “a revelation or an uncovering” of something previously unknown.

Apocalypse refers to a kind of Jewish literature that flourished during the second century BC and the first century AD. Apocalyptic literature uses often dramatic symbolism to assert God’s command of history despite the difficulties and conflicts people face. As Skinner writes, it proclaims “God is about to break in and set the world to rights.”

While the **Apocalyptic** worldview was familiar to Jesus and his first followers, the Bible does not contain much apocalyptic literature.

- What are the major Biblical examples of apocalyptic literature?

“The Son of Man is Coming”

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all preserve traditions about Jesus discussing his future return as “the Son of Man”.

Scripture Focus – Daniel 7:9-14

- What does the “one like a son of man” (vs. 13) in Daniel’s apocalyptic vision do? What does this figure’s coming mean for the world?
- What kind of expectations and emotions might have been stirred up by this title when Jesus’s earliest followers applied it to him?

Scripture Focus – Mark 13:24-37, Matthew 24:29-44, Luke 21:25-36

All three of these scripture passages take place a few days before the Passover, after Jesus has entered Jerusalem and has had several confrontations with the Temple leadership. Some of these leaders will hand him over to Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, who will order his crucifixion.

All three of these scripture passages follow people talking about their awestruck admiration of the Temple – “an eye-popping architectural accomplishment adorned with precious metals and jewel.” Jesus foretells the Temple’s destruction, which occurred in 70 AD, when the Roman Empire put down a revolt among Jews in Judea (66-70 AD).

All three of these scripture passages are part of Jesus’s response to questions about when the Temple’s destruction will happen, although he doesn’t answer those questions narrowly or directly; instead, he is “describing larger and recurring patterns of peril and conflict in the world.”

Group/Individual Work...

Read the assigned Scripture passage. Answer the following questions...

- What signs accompany the Son of Man’s appearance, and what do these signs mean?
- What does the Son of Man do when he appears?
- What does Jesus say about when the Son of Man will come?
- What instructions does Jesus give?

Follow Up...

- What do these scriptures leave you thinking and feeling?
- Why does Jesus compare watching for signs of his coming to observing a fig tree?
- In Matthew 24:36, Jesus says “only the Father” knows the timing of his return. How does or how ought it shape Christians’ interest in and response to efforts to predict when Jesus will return?
- Skinner explains the dualistic thinking, like that in Matthew 24:40-41, is common in apocalyptic worldviews. What purposes can such thinking serve? What problems can it create? When, if ever, have you encountered it? How do and ought Christians respond to it?
- Skinner also states that Jesus gives “no explicit promise of a new state of affairs, only the promise of a coming person: Jesus himself...Before Advent is hope for *anything*, it is hope for Jesus.” What difference does it make to you that the object of Advent hope is in the person of Jesus and not, as Skinner says, “in ideals, statistics, or policies”?

Closing

In the Scriptures, Jesus calls his disciples to be alert and to pay attention. He calls disciples today to pay attention to more than possible signs of his *Parousia*. Skinner says, “Attentiveness to God will produce attentiveness to our neighbors. Attentiveness to our neighbors will produce attentiveness to their needs and struggles, even as it produces appreciation for who they are as people made in God’s image.”

- How does paying attention to God lead us to pay more attention to other people?
- How does hope for Jesus’s future return inspire and sustain attentive care for other people and for the world today?

Closing Prayer (drawn from the hymn *O Lord, How Shall I Meet You?*)

O Lord, how shall I meet You,
How welcome You aright?
Your people long to greet You,
My Hope, my heart's Delight!
O, kindle, Lord most holy,
Your lamp within my breast
To do in spirit lowly
All that may please You best.

Love caused Your incarnation;
Love brought You down to me.
Your thirst for my salvation
Procured my liberty.
O, love beyond all telling,
That led You to embrace
In love, all love excelling,
Our lost and fallen race.

He comes to judge the nations,
A terror to His foes,
A light of consolations
And blessed hope to those
Who love the Lord's appearing.
O glorious Sun, now come,
Send forth Your beams most cheering
And guide us safely home.

“Voices of Advent”

Session 2: The Voice of John the Baptist

Sunday, December 7 5:00 PM
