

Sermon Guides for 1 Thessalonians – 3 John (Advent)

Series Title: Living Christmas

Tag Line: Advent as a Way of Life

Dates (2020): November 29, December 6, 13, 20

Key Verse:

Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. Don't suppress the Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 5:16-19)

Series Overview

Once again we embark on the familiar and well-worn path toward Christmas. But these are unfamiliar and unsteady times. This year, our Advent journey will be marked by New Testament texts that draw our year through the Bible to a close. We will discover that once again, the letters of Paul and the other epistle writers will give us a timely word, just when we need it. From Thessalonians, we will hear about hope. Timothy will talk to us about peace amid division and falsehood. James will show us how to have joy amid suffering. And 1 John will remind us that nothing else matters without love. These texts of Scripture and the season of Advent remind us of the reliable presence of God, drawing near to us in the coming of Jesus, and enabling us to live out peace, hope, joy, and love every day.

Colors, Image, Mood, Vibe:

Advent colors (blue or purple) or Christmas colors (red, green, gold).

Symbolic holiday images like the star, holly, greenery, Christmas trees, wreaths.

Feelings of hope, expectation, promise, and preparation.

*The final sermon, after Advent and Christmas, is a stand-alone sermon looking ahead to the new year.

Sermon 1

Title: Living Christmas: Hope

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Key Word: Hope

Theme: Living with hope and expectation.

Main Idea: Live with hope, and make that hope real in the way we rejoice, pray, and give thanks.

Sermon Description:

The practical message here comes from verses 16-19: “Rejoice always. Pray continually. Give thanks in every situation because this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. Don’t suppress the Spirit.” First Thessalonians is one of the earliest epistles from Paul, and therefore one of the first New Testament books written. It emerged relatively soon after the birth of the church, when the first Christians were living in hope and expectation of the imminent return of Jesus.

First Thessalonians, then, is written in the context of hope—that the trials and sufferings of the present moment will be met by a fresh advent of Jesus into the world, to redeem and reclaim it. Even though that literal second coming has not yet happened, the principles of living with hope and expectation from 1 Thessalonians are still relevant to us today. Live with the confidence that God is still breaking into our reality, and let that confidence shape the way we rejoice, pray, and give thanks. It is up to us to make hope real.

Birth Narrative Connections: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Anna, and Zechariah (Luke)

Sermon 2

Title: Living Christmas: Peace

Scripture: 1 Timothy 2:1-7

Key Word: Peace

Theme: Godliness and dignity.

Main Idea: Living with peace does not mean avoiding conflict, but holding one's truth lovingly.

Sermon Description:

The practical message here comes from verse 1: "I ask that requests, prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving be made for all people." There are two main emphases in this passage: pray for everyone, and live in God's truth. Paul was writing to Timothy in a time when there were many false teachers, and so heresy, blasphemy, and idolatry was a significant threat to new Christians and leaders in the church. Paul called Timothy to hold on to what is true, while still lifting up everyone in prayer, including "kings and those in authority." This was the key for Paul to live with godliness and dignity.

"Godliness" and "dignity" were related, in Paul's mind. To fully reveal the divine image in your life means living with dignity and acknowledging the dignity of others.

Birth Narrative Connection: Visitation to Joseph

Sermon 3

Title: Living Christmas: Joy

Scripture: James 1:2-4

Key Word: Joy

Theme: Facing suffering and trials.

Main Idea: Living with joy means seeing suffering and tribulation as opportunities, not simply as challenges.

Sermon Description:

The practical message here comes from verse 2: “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.” Suffering is inevitable, regardless of how pious and faithful one is. Hardship happens to all of us. What should distinguish us as followers of Jesus is our response to that suffering, and James offers some surprising advice: consider suffering as an opportunity for joy.

How? Because hardship can make us stronger. It can build endurance and persistence, and form us over the long haul for living a life of character. No, we should not see suffering itself as a gift, and God certainly is not the author of human suffering. But the resurrection teaches us that possibilities of new life are always on the horizon, and enduring the difficulties can lead to an embrace of resurrection. In this way, hope and joy are related. We can claim a hope that promises a joy that will come. And that hope can also give us joy in the present moment.

Birth Narrative Connection: Visitation to Mary

Sermon 4

Title: Living Christmas: Love

Scripture: 1 John 3:18-24

Key Word: Love

Theme: The gift of love.

Main Idea: Living with love means sharing the gift of God's love, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Sermon Description

The practical message here comes from “Little children, let's not love with words or speech but with action and truth.” It is in this verse that we see the chief characteristic of both the gospel of John—which emphasizes truth and belief—and the epistles of John, which emphasize love. For John, the ideas of truth and love are intertwined. We love God and others because of the truth of God's love revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Failure to believe in Jesus will lead to a lesser expression of love, even hatred and division. And loving God means taking the truth of our faith and making it impactful on the lives of others. The two go hand in hand.

Our journey to Christmas through Advent is centered on love. John's gospel reminds us that God loved the world so much that he gave Jesus, so that whoever believed in him would have eternal life. The gift of Jesus, whom we will celebrate just days away, is the greatest expression of love that God has ever given us. And for the epistles of John, that gift of love calls us to love others in response.

Birth Narrative Connection: The prologue of John's gospel, in chapter 1

Sermon 5 (Christmas)

Title: Living Christmas

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Key Word: New Life

Theme: The Incarnation

Main Idea: Jesus came to earth in order to bring us new life and a new relationship with God.

Sermon Description

The message of Christmas is timeless, but this year it seems even more timely. God's Incarnation in Christ reminds us that God is not distant or absent to our condition, but is intimately present and near to us. We might need to be socially distant from each other, but God's love is not distant from us. Because of that, we can share in the bright promise of living Christmas every day: we can embody hope, joy, peace, and love in our interactions with others, and in our outlook on life.

Regardless of how different our observance of Christmas might be this year, God's presence is steady, God's love is strong, and our life in Christ is secure.

First Sunday of the New Year (Stand-Alone Sunday)

Title: It's a New Year, Thank God!

Date (2021): January 3

Scripture: Isaiah 43:18-19

Key Word: Commitment

Theme: Celebration, anticipation, and renewing our commitment

Main Idea: The new year offers us an opportunity to celebrate and grieve the past and renew our commitment to God as we look ahead.

Sermon Description:

This service is a stand-alone Sunday after Christmas. It will celebrate the new year, help us grieve all we have lost and left behind in this past year, anticipate the year ahead, and guide us in recommitting our hearts to God.