

Advent Lesson One: Mercy and Justice in the Coming King

Objective: To read through traditional Advent readings about the coming King and Kingdom. We want to discover together what kind of king Jesus is and what the Kingdom of God looks like. We recognize ways in which the Kingdom of God has already come and ways in which we are still waiting for the ultimate fulfillment of the kingdom.

Some Ideas for teachings these classes:

1. Read through all the scriptures in class. You could ask four different people in the class to read each scripture. This will take up a lot of time, but since this is built on the Advent readings, I think it's good for everyone to read/hear all of them even more than just talking about them – it is okay to cut the discussion short because you spend so much time reading.
2. I have written this in a question and answer format, but you can use whatever format you would like. Some questions are based directly off of the scripture and others are ones for people to think about and give their own thoughts based on the passage and reflection on their own experience and knowledge. I have written questions that might work well, but you may have better ones! Don't feel like all the questions need to be answered, the most important thing is to read the scriptures and talk about the hope that we have in Christ as the King who brings mercy and justice.
3. At the end of each lesson there is a short, written prayer that goes with the Advent readings. You could use it to close out your class, or you can disregard it.

Opening Question: What is your idea of what the world would look like if everything was made right?

Introduction

When Jesus was born to a young woman in Bethlehem, the Israelites had been waiting and hoping for deliverance. We tend to think they were waiting for deliverance from legalism, but they were waiting for deliverance from the Romans. They wanted to have their land and temple back! The original temple was destroyed, and Herod had built a second temple; but they knew he was not the true king, so they believed this temple could not be the true temple. They were waiting for the restoration of the temple under the leadership of a Davidic king or possibly a priest, and they believed that the new age, when the Romans would no longer rule their land, would come when the temple was restored.¹ They yearned to be a great nation again, the way they had been promised. When they read the prophets, they understood them to be speaking about Israel's deliverance from foreign rule and a return of all those who lived in the Diaspora (those who were spread out among the nations after the exile) to their homeland. They believed their land was the blessing that God had given them, and they were waiting for him to drive the Romans off their land.²

When the Old Testament prophets (such as Isaiah and Jeremiah) prophesied, they were thinking of a Davidic king who would restore Israel. They knew that a time of destruction was coming due to the covenant breaking behavior of the Israelites, but they also looked forward to a time when Israel would be restored. They believed that a new Davidic king would rule with righteousness, power, justice and compassion. They also believed that all the destruction that had occurred would be reversed, and the people

¹ N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 226.

² Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 227.

would live in peace and safety as they were gathered back together from the ends of the earth where they had been sent in exile.³

However, when early Christians read these same prophecies, they saw Jesus as being the fulfillment of them. They recognized that Jesus was a Davidic king who brought reversal and would make all things right. In the New Testament, we see an explosion of scriptural interpretation as early Christians understand that this Messiah – this miracle of incarnation – was Jesus Christ who came to fulfill all the prophecies and would offer true deliverance.

Read Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;

from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

²The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—

the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,

the Spirit of counsel and of might,

the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—

³and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,

or decide by what he hears with his ears;

⁴but with righteousness he will judge the needy,

with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;

with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

³ For information in this paragraph, see J.D. Hays, “Prophecy and Eschatology in Christian Theology,” In *The IVP Bible Dictionary Series: Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, edited by Mark J. Boda, and J. Gordon McConville (InterVarsity Press, 2013).
http://ezproxy.acu.edu:2048/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/ivpotp/sexuality_sexual_ethics/0?institutionId=4602

- ⁵ Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
- ⁶ The wolf will live with the lamb,
the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.
- ⁷ The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
- ⁸ The infant will play near the cobra's den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.
- ⁹ They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
- ¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

This portion of scripture is well known and loved by the church for its promise of a Messiah who brings peace and justice. It speaks of the coming reign of God, presented in two different ways:

Vs. 1-5: Reign of God through a new and ideal king from the Davidic line

Vs. 6-9 Reign of God in the order of creation with the establishment of peace and tranquility – even among enemies.⁴

⁴ Gene M. Tucker, "The Book of Isaiah 1-39: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Pages 26-305 in *Introduction to Prophetic Literature, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel* Vol. 6 of *New Interpreter's Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 139-140.

Why do you think the author uses the image of a tree stump in verse 1?

Jesse was the father of David, who was the greatest king Israel had known. Under David, the kingdom flourished and grew. He helped the Israelite kingdom become bigger and more established. His son Solomon ruled over a large, peaceful, prosperous kingdom. Once Solomon was gone, the country divided; and it was never the same again. The people always looked back on the time of David as an ideal time. They also remembered God's promise that the prophet Nathan spoke to David in 2 Samuel 7:16, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever."⁵ By now there was not much left of the Davidic dynasty – the prophet portrays it as just a stump. But, God can bring something mighty from something that is almost gone – and he will – a shoot will come out of the stump, and the branch will grow fruit using the nutrients from the deep roots.

What will this new king be like? How will the Spirit of the Lord help him?

The new king will delight in the Lord and judge fairly – not just by what he sees and hears. He will see to the heart of things to know what is really going on. He will judge the poor with righteousness, help the meek, and kill the wicked. Justice will be done. He will be righteous and faithful.

The promised king's character will be shaped by the Spirit of the Lord who was active and creative during creation (Genesis 1:2).⁶ The Spirit will rest on the king, giving him wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

⁵ Tucker, 140.

⁶ Tucker, 140.

All of this will help him be a king who delights in the Lord and judges fairly – he will be able to see the things that others cannot see.

What images are shown to us of what life will be like with this new king?

The king's reign will be marked by peace and harmony – those that are natural enemies will get along. A young child – completely unexpectedly – will lead them. Nothing will be hurt. All the animals will get along – enemies will become friends. All will be made well. While some might interpret this passage to mean that predators and their prey in the animal world will learn to get along, it is likely that these are metaphorical images meant to show us what the world will be like when all humans get along.

In what ways can we see Jesus fulfilling Isaiah 11:1-10?

Here are just a few ideas:

*Jesus came from the Davidic line - both Matthew and Luke are sure to point that out to us.

*The Spirit of the Lord rests on him. In Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22, and John 1:32-33, we learn that the Spirit of God descends on Jesus in the form of a dove, literally “resting” on him. Jesus he declares it when he preaches at the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:18-19) when he reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 (Septuagint version) saying,

“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,

to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

*Jesus was an example of not judging with his eyes but seeing to the heart of things (ie: John 8:1-11).

*He did help the poor and needy, bringing healing to many who were sick and hope to those who were hopeless.

*His followers were able to put aside their differences in order to pursue and follow Jesus (ie: Simon the Zealot and Levi the tax collector who would have been on completely opposite ends of the political spectrum!).

What hope do you find in Isaiah 11:1-10?

Read Psalm 72:1-7,18-19

¹ Endow the king with your justice, O God,
the royal son with your righteousness.

² May he judge your people in righteousness,
your afflicted ones with justice.

³ May the mountains bring prosperity to the people,
the hills the fruit of righteousness.

⁴ May he defend the afflicted among the people
and save the children of the needy;
may he crush the oppressor.

⁵ May he endure as long as the sun,
as long as the moon, through all generations.

⁶ May he be like rain falling on a mown field,
like showers watering the earth.

⁷ In his days may the righteous flourish
and prosperity abound till the moon is no more.

¹⁸ Praise be to the Lord God, the God of Israel,
who alone does marvelous deeds.

¹⁹ Praise be to his glorious name forever;
may the whole earth be filled with his glory.

Amen and Amen.

This is a prayer for the king – possibly for Solomon and then used for Davidic kings’ coronations afterwards. It would have been used by the Jews first as a prayer for their kings then (after the exile) as they awaited a Messiah who would deliver them – one who would make things right. It was clear that this king was meant to rule the earth (72:8-11) and that everyone would worship him! He would rule from “sea to sea” to the “ends of the earth,” and all kings and nations would bow down to him. Early Christians saw Jesus in this Psalm and adopted it as their own.⁷

What qualities does the “pray-er” ask God to give the king?

He prays for the king to have God’s justice and righteousness and to judge in righteousness. We learn from this that the king is supposed to enact God’s rule, and God’s rule and will is one of justice and righteousness. When the king rules in this way, he reflects God’s character.⁸

⁷ J. Clington McCann, Jr, “The Book of Psalms: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” Pages 640-1280 in *1&2 Maccabees, Introduction to Hebrew Poetry, Job, Psalms*, Vol. 4 of *New Interpreter’s Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 963, 965.

⁸ Tremper Logman III, *Psalms* Vol. 15&16 in *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, (Downers Grove: IVP Press, 2014), 271.

What does he envision the new king doing?

Defending the afflicted, saving needy children, crushing the oppressor, enduring forever - carrying out God's will.

What should his kingdom look like?

When justice and righteousness are present, there will be *shalom* (vs. 3, 7), or peace.⁹ *Shalom* can be translated prosperity, peace, or harmony – all of those meanings may be intended.¹⁰ The poor and needy will be cared for. Justice will be served. The oppressors will be punished, and the righteous will flourish. Everyone (except the oppressors) will live in peace, harmony and prosperity.

What images does the Psalmist use in verse 5 & 6? Why do you think he uses these?

The Psalmist wants the new king to endure as long as the sun and the moon, and to be like rain and showers falling on the earth. The endurance aspect shows that the desire for a just and righteous rule lasts forever – the pray-er is hoping for a king who rules forever with God's will for his people in mind. As Tremper Longman says, "Such a king would be as refreshing and life-giving as rain on the earth."¹¹

No human king was ever able to achieve this ideal – not even David or Solomon.¹² Solomon started with much promise, but he ended up putting so many people to work that

⁹ Mccann, Jr., "Psalms," 963.

¹⁰ Longman, 271.

¹¹ Longman, 271.

¹² Longman, 271.

they described it as a “heavy yoke.”¹³ The prosperity of Solomon’s day came at a heavy price on the people. In contrast, Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30 that following him comes with an easy yoke and provides “rest for your souls.”

Why do you think early Christians saw Jesus as the fulfillment of Psalm 72?

Early Christians saw Jesus as one proclaiming the reign of God (Mark 1:14-15) much as this Psalm envisions one like God ruling. They saw him as one who ministered to the poor and needy and believed that Jesus’ birth brought peace on earth (Luke 2:14).¹⁴

What are the similarities between this king/kingdom and the one in Isaiah 11:10?

The king is one who is merciful and righteous and just. He carries out God’s will and reflects God’s character. The kingdom that both Psalm 72 and Isaiah 11:1-10 envision is one in which God reigns, and His will is done. In both, the poor and afflicted find mercy and help. Justice is served, and the people find shalom. There is peace and harmony among everyone. When we pray the prayer found in Psalm 72, we are essentially praying “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”¹⁵

What emotions do you feel as you read about what the world will look like when everything is made right? What do you envision it looking like as you read these texts?

¹³ See I Kings 12: 4

¹⁴ McCann, Jr. “Psalms,” 965.

¹⁵ McCann, Jr., “Psalms,” 965.

Transition:

As mentioned earlier, the Jews were waiting for their world to be made right. The Davidic dynasty ended in 586 BC when Zedekiah was carried off in chains to Babylon.¹⁶ After the Babylonians were defeated, they were ruled by the Persians, then the Syrians, then the Romans. During this time, the Jews realized that they were waiting for a Davidic king to deliver them from foreign rule. As they waited, different factions formed with various ideas about how they should wait: align themselves with the Romans, withdraw to the desert, follow the law perfectly – most of what they did was to try to speed up the process of God sending a Messiah. In the midst of this fractured and oppressed world, in the middle of the desert, John the Baptist appears.

Read Matthew 3:1-12

3 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”

⁴ John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have

¹⁶ Longman, *Psalms*, 273.

Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

¹¹ “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

John the Baptist is getting people ready for the coming King! “The Kingdom of Heaven is coming!” he says. The Jews have been waiting for this – they were hoping for a coming king to deliver them. They were looking for a king in the line of David like the one described in Isaiah 11 and Psalm 72, and they were hoping for a kingdom like the one described in those same readings– a world where everything was made right and where justice was served (to their enemies!). They believed that for the king to return, they had to live by the law, but they knew they had failed. So, when John told them they needed to repent and straighten the paths before the king could come, they knew they needed to do it. They needed to make a way for this king.

Why do you think so many were going to John the Baptist in the desert? What were they doing there?

They were hoping to find out about this new king and kingdom! They were listening to John, repenting of their sins and being baptized in the Jordan River – this baptism was a new thing. N.T. Wright says that as John plunged them in the river, it wasn’t just a symbolic act of their sins being washed away but a sign of God doing

something brand new in history!¹⁷ When the Israelites came to the promised land, they had crossed the Jordan River; and now, they were going through it again. Wright says that this was a “sign that they were getting ready for a greater conquest, God’s defeat of all evil and the establishment of his kingdom on earth as is in heaven.”¹⁸

What is John’s message to the Pharisees and Sadducees?

The Pharisees and Sadducees were two different groups of religious and political leaders in Israel with different approaches to waiting for the coming kingdom. The Sadducees were in the upper crust of society and tended to assimilate with the Romans. The Pharisees held fast to traditional purity laws, doing everything they could do to get all the Israelites to follow the law, so their nation could be morally ready for a coming Messiah and deliverance from the Romans. They believed that once the Jews were completely pure, especially when it came to the Sabbath, circumcision, and dietary laws, the Messiah would come and rescue them. To help the nation be ready for the Messiah, they created new laws to try make sure that everyone followed God’s law. John seems to say that none of this matters – all this work they have done (by itself) has not made them pure.

He calls them a “brood of vipers” (poisonous snakes) and tells them to bear fruit worthy of repentance, meaning their repentance should lead to good works. He reminds them they can’t assume that they will be saved from the “coming wrath” simply because

¹⁷ Tom Wright, *Advent for Everyone: A Journey Through Matthew* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2016), 34.

¹⁸ Wright, *Advent for Everyone*, 34.

they are Abraham's descendants. There will be mercy, but there will also be judgement. Those whose hearts aren't right, won't make it in the new kingdom.¹⁹

What do you think it looks like to have a heart that is ready for the kingdom?

Read Romans 15:4-13

⁴For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.

⁵May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, ⁶so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁷Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. ⁸For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed ⁹and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written:

“Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;

I will sing the praises of your name.”

¹⁰ Again, it says,

“Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people.”

¹¹ And again,

“Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;

let all the peoples extol him.”

¹² And again, Isaiah says,

“The Root of Jesse will spring up,

one who will arise to rule over the nations;

in him the Gentiles will hope.”

¹⁹ Wright, *Advent for Everyone*, 35.

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What does Paul have to say here about the purpose of Scripture?

Paul seems to be saying that Scripture is a means of grace.²⁰ It teaches us and gives us hope as we learn about endurance and see the encouragement in scripture. In this passage Paul goes on to quote scripture speaking of the Gentiles being a part of the family of God. (Note: If they read differently from the scriptures in your Old Testament, it is because he was quoting the Greek Septuagint – the Old Testament they used that translated into Greek. Our Old Testament is translated from the Hebrew, and there are some variations.) When we read the scriptures he quotes and see that the Messiah and coming kingdom is for everyone, we find hope.

Scripture points us to Christ, the one who came to save us and to make things right. The kingdom the Old Testament speaks of is one where everything is made right – where those who need mercy are shown mercy, the needy and afflicted are cared for, and the oppressors face justice. The Gentiles get to be a part of this kingdom! Anyone who wants to can be a part of the kingdom of God!

In the Matthew passage, we saw that just because people follow purity laws, it does not mean their hearts are in the right place. Based on this passage, what do you think Paul would say about how our hearts can honor God?

²⁰ N.T. Wright “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.” Pages 394-769 in *Acts, Introduction to Epistolary Literature, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, Vol. 10 of *New Interpreter’s Bible*. Edited by Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 746.

Paul puts a lot of emphasis on unity and glorifying God. N.T. Wright says that 15:6 should literally be translated to be “to think the same thing among one another according to the Messiah Jesus” meaning that we should all be striving to follow Jesus and think as he thinks.²¹ We are unified enough with other Christians that we glorify God together, accepting each other the way Christ accepted us. We honor God by following and imitating Christ and glorifying God with other Christians.

Possible Ending Question:

How does today’s lesson give you hope? Why do you think hope is important? Who gives us this hope?

Ending Prayer

God of timeless grace,
you fill us with joyful expectation.
Make us ready for the message that prepares the way,
that with uprightness of heart and holy joy
we may eagerly await the kingdom of your Son, Jesus Christ,
who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.²²

²¹ Wright, “Romans,” 746.

²² <https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/prayers.php?id=2>. Accessed on November 13, 2019.

Synopsis:

Isaiah 11:1-10 and Psalm 72 both speak of an ideal king who rules like God – one who has the character of God. This king would rule with justice, mercy and righteousness. No human king has ever fit this ideal; and even before Jesus came, the Jews knew they were waiting for a king like this one. A king like this would have a kingdom where everyone lived in peace and harmony with each other – even those who were naturally enemies. As the people waited for this king and this coming kingdom, they tried to follow all the laws, but sometimes their hearts were in the wrong place. When John the Baptist came (Matthew 3:1-12), he proclaimed the coming king and the need for everyone’s hearts to be ready for the Messiah. In Romans 15, Paul reminds us that Gentiles and Jews are a part of the kingdom of God – that we can find encouragement in the mercy that God has on all of us.

We now live in a world where we see the hope that God has for us – Jesus has come and now we wait for him to come again, making all things right. We know that Jesus will bring peace and harmony and free us from the oppression of sin. Even now, those who live under physical oppression, look forward to the day when Jesus will free them. We are thankful to live in a world where we are all a part of the Kingdom and where we get glimpses of the goodness of this kingdom of *shalom*. We look forward to the day when we shall know not just in part but fully.²³

²³ I Corinthians 13:12