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Advent #2: Seeking  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
December 7, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12

So - how did you all do with your homework from last week? You didn't honestly think I would forget about that, did you?

But perhaps you were not here last week. Maybe this is your first time in this church. Perhaps you simply forgot all about the homework.

So here is a short version of what you may have missed last week. Advent - the roughly 4-week period leading up to Christmas Day can be a wonderful time. But one problem with Advent is that we know what to expect. We know that Jesus will come - metaphorically - on December 25. We know the date. We have it all planned out. And while that may be comforting, knowing what to expect makes it hard for us to experience any real anticipation. So last week I shared a plan to increase anticipation this Advent. Here's the plan.

[image: longing]

We cannot really look for Jesus in our midst unless we accept that we long for something in life. We need to grapple with the fact that our lives are incomplete in some way. We need to accept our own longings that are not only deep, but are beyond our grasp. Because we cannot have any anticipation looking for something we already have. We need to come to terms with our own deepest longings if we actually want anticipation. And without anticipation, we will not go out of our comfort zone to search for Jesus in our midst.

So the homework from last week was for each of us to reflect on our lives. And to try to name at least one thing that we deeply long for. And please do not be confused. If this sounds like some version of a self-help exercise. Of course it is! But why would we even bother to look for Jesus if we don't want to find something. Something that matters to us. Perhaps new life. Perhaps our own healing. Perhaps the peace of God within us. All that stuff that preachers like to go on and on about during Advent.

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[ask: anyone willing to share what they long for]

Well, thanks for those of you who shared. I was hoping that some of you would be willing to share. I was also hoping that many of you would not share. That you would not share out loud your deepest longings because they are simply too personal. And if that's your experience, then great! Advent is not a competition. Or if it is a competition, it is only between you and yourself to see how vulnerable you are willing to be with yourself. It is only between you and yourself to see how far beyond your own comfort zone you are willing to go in your search for the divine in your midst.

OK - so now we have some grasp on our deepest longings. How does that relate to the idea of searching for Jesus in our midst? What does it even mean to "search for Jesus"?

[image: binoculars]

One thing that "looking for Jesus" does not mean during Advent is looking for the historical Jesus. Looking for the historical Jesus means delving into history to see who Jesus was and how accurate the gospel stories are. Looking into the historical Jesus integrates the Bible, historical sources, an understanding of culture, and an understanding of human nature to create a vision of Jesus that is as realistic as we can find. Looking into the historical Jesus and his ministry is an interesting and worthwhile activity. And I encourage it. But I do not think that is what Advent is calling us to. Because Advent calls us into our future, not our past. During Advent we are called to see who Jesus is and might be for us today, not who Jesus was.

So now I have just joined the long list of preachers who freely say that Advent is about looking for Jesus but have told you what looking for Jesus does not mean. Rather than telling you what it does mean. I've just done something entirely traditional. And it didn't seem to help at all.

[image: lens]

That happens all the time, actually. For example, do you know that the Bible talks about the importance of forgiveness something like 89 times. But it never once tells you how to actually do it? And I'm sure you've heard countless sermons about the importance of looking for Jesus in our midst but you were never told how to actually do that. Oh

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sure, the Bible will tell you that when you seek God you will fail if you have too much pride. That you will fail if you are seeking the wrong things in life. The Bible will tell you that your search for the divine will fail if you do not look with your whole heart. Well, those statements are probably all true. But that still does not tell us how to actually do it. How do we seek Jesus - or the divine if you prefer - in our midst?

In one sense, it's very simple. If the Jesus we seek is the answer to our own deepest longing, then we need to look wherever our longings take us. Which means we need to look somewhere we have not already looked. How do I know that? Simple. Because we have already looked in familiar places, and yet, our longings persist. So logically, we now need to look in new places - in unfamiliar places.

Advent is an invitation into unknown places. Advent is an adventure.

Let me share a true story. Some years ago during Advent, I was driving home in the dark - at 5 pm. And my brain was a jumble of ideas about Advent because I had been working on Advent materials that day. I'd been playing with different ideas of how to make Advent more impactful that year. As I do every year. But on that particular occasion, while driving home, I happened to glance at my car audio system. And what I saw made me drive off the road. Well, that last bit was a bit over-dramatic, I admit. But I did pull over so that I could take this picture.

[slide: born for advent]

According to the display on my car audio system, I was listening to a song called "Born for Advent", by the hard rock band, "Styx". Now, if you like Styx as much as I do you know they never played a song by that name. The song that was blasting away as I drove home was actually, "Born for Adventure". On the surface the song is not obviously a Christmas song. But if we dig a bit deeper into the meaning of the song - it is still not a Christmas song.

But the display on my audio system reminded me of something important. That Advent is an adventure. The song reminded me that all adventures require us to go beyond the familiar and to open ourselves to the unfamiliar. And that reminded me that the church has worked very hard over the centuries to squash that very idea.

This is well-summarized by Simon Jenkins in his book,

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[slide: jumble sales of the apocalypse]

“Jumble Sales of the Apocalypse”. I quote, “Western Christianity boasts some eccentric forms of religion, perhaps most famously the Pentecostal snake-handling churches of the Appalachian Mountains. Their favourite Bible verse isn’t John 3:16, but the one where Jesus says in passing that his future followers would ‘take up serpents’ without harm. Unfortunately, the rattlesnakes they take to church do not hold the same interpretation of this proof text, with the result that quite a few believers have perished.

[image: darth vader clergy]

Snake-handlers aside, most of Western Christianity is an utter bore compared with the wild eccentricities of the Eastern church. Orthodox monks and nuns have lived up trees, in barrels, in bricked-up chapels or out in the fields grazing like sheep. St Simeon the Stylite started a craze among Syrian monks by balancing on top of a 50-foot pillar, drawing huge crowds and practising a kind of divine vertigo.

You would think such extreme saints had reached the far end of austerity. But there was one final feat of mortification, and even the toughest men and women of the desert were in awe of it. It was the calling to be a fool for Christ. The first of these mavericks was another Syrian saint, Simeon the Holy Fool, who lived quietly as a monk in a Dead Sea cave for 29 years. But then one day he set out for the city of Emesa. He had decided to mock the idiocy of the world and convert sinners by becoming a public fool.

During church services, he pelted the clergy with nuts.

[image: throwing nuts at the clergy]

In some of my former congregations, the choir used to throw bags of nuts at me from time to time. I am very grateful to be out of reach of our choir here.

In the circus, Simeon the Holy Fool wrapped his arms around the dancing girls and went skipping across the arena. In the bath-house, he ran naked into the crowded women’s section. On solemn fasting days he feasted riotously on beans, with predictable results. The locals saw him as a madman and beat him when his antics proved too much.”<sup>1</sup> But holy fools went even deeper into the spectrum, and found the ultra-violet of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://shipoffools.com/2019/07/in-praise-of-holy-fools/>

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holiness as divine lunatics, outsiders and troublemakers. They added one more impossible thing to their vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and that was humility to the point of humiliation.

[image: rev paul being foolish]

Our churches today - and our clergy - are completely boring by comparison. We seem to prefer the safe and the sensible to the edgy risings of the spirit. Where is there any space for adventure? Do we actually want adventure?

Catholic reporter Rich Heffern defines adventure this way, “The definition of an adventure is an undertaking or enterprise of a hazardous nature. We have no way of discerning ahead of time what the outcome will be. If we could, it would lose its exciting aspect.”<sup>2</sup> This advent, are you looking for adventure? Are you looking for adventure even if it might lead to something of a “hazardous nature”?

Perhaps this Advent we should all go out of our own comfort zones and follow St Simeon, the “Holy Fool”. Not that we should act stupidly. But that we should act without caring what other people think about us. The point is not foolishness for it’s own sake. But foolishness for the sake of love. To act on our impulses of love and gratitude, without worrying about how others will view us. You do not need to throw nuts at me.

[image: seeking in thorncliffe park]

Being a “holy fool” does not have to mean acting like an idiot. These days, many people feel lonely and isolated. Many people feel alone. We can impact other people with simple things. Unexpected things. Loving things. Go - and be that person who buys coffee for a random stranger. Go - and be that person who holds doors open at the mall and greets strangers warmly. Go - and go slightly out of your way to be helpful to others. Go - and say “Merry Christmas” to random people. Go - invite someone to share a meal with you today. In our modern day-and-age, simply being friendly to strangers is seen as foolish. Go - and be a holy fool.

You won’t be the first. Isaiah reminds us of a vision of a peace. That the wolf will lie down with the lamb.” For some reason I always picture it this way.

[slide: iron will lie down with the lamp]

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/earthbeat/eco-catholic/adventure-advent>

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Which makes no sense. So it fits beautifully in Advent.

And Matthew reminds us of how crazy John was. “Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey”. What could be more foolish than that? The only thing more foolish than that would be calling the religious leaders of his day a “brood of vipers”. Wait - John did that too!

[image: seeking in thorncliffe park]

This Advent, search for Jesus in your midst by playing a holy fool - stop caring what other people think of you and go where your heart leads you. Go beyond your comfort zone by ignoring what other people think of you.

For some of us, being a holy fool does not require us to step out at all. Because we already feel like outsiders. Like we do not belong. Like we are the odd ones out - misfits. But Advent is good news especially for misfits. The whole Advent story is about God working through people who were misfits - people who did not fit in. Isaiah’s wild visions - today - would lead him to being medicated. John the Baptist - today - would be living on the streets. Simeon the holy fool - today - would be incarcerated. Even Jesus was a misfit - being born in a place normally reserved for animals. Born on the wrong side of town. Born on the wrong side of the tracks.

Advent reminds us that we belong in the story exactly as we are. Whoever you are. You belong in Advent. You fit because God has already made room for you. You belong here.

[slide: born for advent]

Go for the adventure of Advent. Engage with strangers. Reach out to others in your midst, particularly those who might need the touch of God in their lives. In the process ... you will find Jesus in your midst.

Besides you have nothing to lose. Even if you do not happen to notice Jesus in your midst, you’ll have a great time. But I think you will find more than that. You were born for Adventure. And you were born for Advent. So go - and make a fool of yourself!  
*Amen.*