

[BLANK] [PRAYER] Good morning! Happy new year! Here we are, in a whole new Christian year. Advent, the season when we get ready to celebrate the coming of Jesus, the Christ, is our first season as Christians. It's when we invite ourselves and our friends to begin the story of God in our lives all over again. This story of faith, this story of who and how God is with us, and for us, and guiding us towards who we're meant to be, is the most precious gift that we will ever receive. Our lives are a gift from God, our lives are re-gifted to us by God through faith in Jesus Christ, and our lives become the most alive, most connected to God's amazing possibilities, through God's Holy Spirit. Faith is the gift of true and lasting life!

Faith is all about opening gifts. God is constantly trying to give us gifts, and trying to make us aware of our gifts. When we hit a dark spot in our lives, God points us towards God's gifts in the middle of the darkness, and points us towards new light ahead. God is a giver from the get-go - God never stops trying to give us good things in our lives! If we invited God to our houses, Santa Claus would be put to shame - all of the gifts that God wants to give us wouldn't come close to fitting down the chimney!

And yet, in spite of the amazing generosity of our God, in spite of God's best efforts to give us great gifts, we're not always ready to open them. God has had gifts waiting for us since before the beginning of time, but, somehow, we're not always ready to open them. In a children's message recently, I mentioned how my grandfather always made it a point to make sure that we saw him using our gifts - even a simple ball-point pen. [GIFT] My grandmother was kind of the opposite. After my grandfather died, I was helping her to clean out some closets, and I found all of our childhood Christmas gifts to her, all lined up, unopened, and unused. She cherished them, she valued them, but she never really used them.

Thinking about all of the feelings that I had when I saw those gifts in my grandmother's closet, I can only imagine what God feels when we don't get around to opening the gifts of faith that God offers us. God is always calling to us through the gifts of God's grace, but God's joy in giving is not complete until we open the gifts of faith, and use them. [BLANK] God's gifts of faith aren't an ending, something received, and then put away in the closet of our hearts. They are a beginning, a beginning of a journey in faith. That's why our Christian year starts with Advent. Advent is a coming, a coming to the arrival of Jesus in our hearts, a journey to Jesus that prepares us for the journey of faith ahead in the new year, with Jesus in our hearts. We're not there yet. We are meant to prepare for the coming of God's new and renewed gifts of faith.

[KIT] As you came into our sanctuary today, you received a special travel kit. We hope that you use this gift for real, and don't just tuck it away! But you'll also find in it important reminders and tools. We hope they'll help you to remember to open the gifts of faith throughout the year ahead. In my four sermons this Advent, each will focus on an important tool in your kit that we can use to open the gifts of faith in our journeys through life.

[MIRROR] Our first tool for you to open the gifts of faith is the mirror. We

usually use mirrors to see ourselves reflected. This is a reminder to us that if we want to open our minds and hearts and lives to the gifts of faith, it starts with taking time for reflection. Usually when we use a mirror, we look at ourselves on the outside. In a world where people are sharing “selfie” pictures of themselves to the world from their phones, we seem to be obsessed with making our outsides look good to the world! But that’s not the kind of reflection that we’re talking about for opening our gifts of faith, Amen?

[REFLECTION] No, for people of faith, reflection is about trying to see what is happening to us on the inside, in relation to ourselves, and to God’s world. Reflection from a faith point of view is taking time to see things from God’s point of view. That word “time” is the key ingredient, isn’t it? Usually we look in a mirror in a dash through the bathroom, making sure that we don’t look like a mess. Faith reflection asks us to invest time in seeing things as God sees them. We drop trying to make what we see in the mirror fit our will, and we slow down enough to see our connection to God’s will in what we see.

Sometimes what we see in the mirror of faith reflection is comforting, and amazing. If you’ve been serious about firing up a saving faith this year, as we explored in our summer sermon series, then maybe your reflections bring you to how faith has opened up God’s possibilities in your life. If we put aside the phone, the PC, the TV, the car, the job, the family, or whatever distracts us, and reflect on being creations of God, we can reclaim the sense of deep value and worth that God gifted to us.

And sometimes, reflecting in faith brings us to the things that we’d rather not see in ourselves. [YOM KIPPUR] Faithful Jewish people start off their year of faith with Yom Kippur, a day of prayer and reflection on their personal sins before the God of all gifts. Their faith requires people to spend time - good time - reflecting on what they see in themselves. Does it look like God’s reflection, the image of God, or not? Time spent on faith reflection is not wasted; it prepares us for spending our time and energy on dealing with life in the light of God’s greatest gifts - love, truth, and forgiveness. [BLANK]

The Jewish prophets in the Hebrew Bible understood the power of reflection. They spent time allowing God’s vision of how things were, and how they could be, to fill their lives, until what they saw reflected was not just their own lives and times, but all life, and all time. In today’s reading from the prophet Jeremiah, he tells us about a time when their nation that had been destroyed would know a time of redemption, a time when the restored city of Jerusalem would be known by its people living in the righteousness of God, loving God and the world as God already loves us. You can’t see a vision of God restoring our lives until you reflect on God’s vision.

What we see in times of faith reflection doesn’t always seem to fit our life and our time that we live in today. Sometimes, God gives us the gift of a vision, and it can take a long time for us to see it opening. Look at me - still opening the gift of a vision for ministry that God gave me, forty years ago, now when my hair is gray! That’s why we give you a travel kit for the year ahead. As we open the gifts of faith, be ready for a journey that will call us to reflect on God’s will for us, again and again, until we stop seeing less of us in the mirror, and more of what God has planned for us, and for God’s world.

On this first Sunday in Advent, even Jesus is guiding us to the gifts of faith that come from reflection. In today's reading from Luke's gospel, Jesus is reminding us that the ending of God's story will be a time like Jeremiah saw in his reflections - a time when evil has been conquered, a time when even heaven and earth will give way to the victory of Jesus, God's living Word. Jesus reminds us, at the start of our year of Christian faith, that people who take the time to reflect on God's story through faith will see God's plan unfolding, and know that God's redemption of us, and of all of creation, is near, right now.

Welcome to Advent. Welcome to a time when God invites us to take time to unwrap all of God's gifts of faith. God asks us to start our new year of faith by putting aside our busy-ness, and to make time to just be - to just be children of God, eager to receive God's gift of Jesus on Christmas, and beyond. Put down your phones. Put down your sense that every problem should fit into neat little solutions, like a two-hour movie. Open the gifts of faith, gifts that will help us on a journey that has a path and a destination already prepared for us, through God's grace.

Take a walk through God's creation, cool, and still, preparing for new possibilities. Put your hands together, and pray - or, better yet, put your knees on the floor as you pray, so that your reflections will leave more headroom for God's possibilities. Take your hands, and try opening the story of God's redemption, the Bible, and reflect on your life through the eyes of God's story, on your own, and in our faith groups. And then, look up, and see your life, and the world, as an invitation to God's amazing possibilities, gifts that God wants us to open through faith. Have a blessed Advent, as we journey towards the Christ child, and beyond. Amen.