

Home by Another Way: A Journey Interrupted

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The First Sunday of Advent, Year A
November 30, 2025 | Grace UMC, Denver, CO

This is what Isaiah, Amoz’s son, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the days to come the mountain of the Lord’s house will be the highest of the mountains, lifted above the hills, and peoples will stream to it. Many nations will go and say, “Come, let’s go up to the Lord’s mountain, to the house of Jacob’s God so that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in God’s paths.” Instruction will come from Zion, the Lord’s word from Jerusalem. God will judge between the nations and settle disputes of mighty nations. Then they will beat their swords into iron plows and their spears into pruning tools. Nation will not take up sword against nation; they will no longer learn how to make war. Come, house of Jacob, let’s walk by the Lord’s light. Isaiah 2:1-5

I rejoiced with those who said to me, “Let’s go to the Lord’s house!” Now our feet are standing in your gates, Jerusalem! Jerusalem is built like a city joined together in unity. That is where the tribes go up—the Lord’s tribes! It is the law for Israel to give thanks to the Lord’s name, because the thrones of justice are there—the thrones of the house of David! Pray that Jerusalem has peace: “Let those who love you have rest. Let there be peace on your walls; let there be rest on your fortifications.” For the sake of my family and friends, I say, “Peace be with you, Jerusalem.” For the sake of the Lord our God’s house I will pray for your good. Psalm 122

“But nobody knows when that day or hour will come, not the heavenly angels and not the Son. Only the Father knows. As it was in the time of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Human One. In those days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark. They didn’t know what was happening until the flood came and swept them all away. The coming of the Human One will be like that. At that time there will be two men in the field. One will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill. One will be taken and the other left. Therefore, stay alert! You don’t know what day the Lord is coming. But you understand that if the head of the house knew at what time the thief would come, he would keep alert and wouldn’t allow the thief to break into his house. Therefore, you also should be prepared, because the Human One will come at a time you don’t know. Matthew 24:36-44

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Somehow here we are again. The first Sunday of Advent and the beginning of a new church year. We begin Advent in a season already full of activity. The calendar fills quickly.

Decorations appear earlier every year. The world is already celebrating Christmas with lights and music, but in the Church, we begin a little differently. Not with angels or shepherds or gifts, but with longing.

Advent doesn’t open with answers. It opens with unease, with prophecy, with the quiet recognition that something is not right in the world and that something holy is drawing near. This season asks us to pay attention, not just to the joy we anticipate, but to the transformation we may not have expected. It asks us to prepare, but not in the way the stores or holiday music playlists suggest. Advent prepares the heart by slowing us down and

pulling us deeper. It is a season of spiritual recalibration, a time to notice where we've been drifting and to turn, gently but deliberately, back toward God.

This year, we're exploring Advent through the lens of *Home by Another Way*, a phrase that comes from the story of the Magi. After they visit the Christ child, they are warned in a dream to return by a different road. And they do. Their journey is changed by the encounter. Their direction shifts, not because they were lost, but because they were paying attention. They listened, they responded, and they returned home by another way.

That story inspired a song by James Taylor, which you may hear soon. It's honest, a little playful, and deeply rooted in the truth that Advent changes how we move through the world. If we let it, this season will send us in a new direction too.

The Gospel text for the first Sunday of Advent does not ease us into the season. It does not start with comfort or sentiment like a good Hallmark movie does. It begins with a call to attention. "Keep awake," Jesus says. Be ready. Be present to the world around you, because you do not know the hour when the holy will arrive.

It is tempting to hear this as a warning, and in a way, it is. But not the kind meant to instill fear. I don't believe Jesus is trying to frighten us into obedience. I think he is trying to wake us up to what we often miss. He points to people in Noah's day eating and excessively drinking, marrying and working, doing many things normal people do until the flood caught them off guard. Not because they were eternally damned to be sinners, but because they were not paying attention.

This is where Advent begins. Not with answers or arrival, but with disruption. With Jesus naming the ways we sleepwalk through life. It is easy to move through the world in patterns

so familiar that we forget to look for grace. We know how to get things done. We do not always know how to stay awake to wonder.

Advent is an interruption. It steps in and insists that there is more. It invites us to notice what we have been missing, to slow down, to begin again with clear eyes and open hands. This season starts with that small shift. It begins when we look up from the craziness of life.

The Prophet Isaiah paints a picture that feels distant but deeply needed. People from every nation walking toward the mountain of God. Not to stake a claim or settle a score, but to learn. To receive instruction. To be shaped by something greater than themselves. The result is one of the most powerful images in all of scripture: tools of war turned into tools of growth. Swords hammered into plowshares. Spears reshaped for tending the earth instead of the battlefield.

This isn't just sentimentality. The prophet is speaking to people surrounded by threat, people who know what it feels like to live under pressure. These words come early in the prophecies that we have, during a time of political instability and rising empires. Assyria is expanding its reach. Fear is thick in the air. Jerusalem is vulnerable, and people are wondering whether they will survive what is coming. And still, Isaiah lifts up this vision. He speaks of a future where the nations gather in peace, where instruction flows from the mountain of God, where weapons are no longer needed. Peace, he says, is not a fantasy. It is possible. Not because the world is ready, but because God is already doing something.

That kind of vision requires a different kind of hope. Not the kind we wish for in passing, but the kind we commit to with our lives. You've heard me call this an "active hope." Isaiah invites his people, and us, to journey in the light of the Lord, even while the shadows still stretch long. He doesn't wait for the world to change before calling people forward. He asks us to move toward the light anyway.

Advent gives us the same invitation. Not to escape the world, but to live faithfully within it. We believe that God is already reshaping what is broken and calling us to live in a different way.

Psalm 122 meets us right where Isaiah leaves us. Isaiah calls us to live in the light of the Lord, to step toward a future shaped by peace. Psalm 122 shows us what that looks like. Not in an abstract sense, but a realized one.

This psalm is a song of movement. It does not come from people standing still or staying home. It rises from those on pilgrimage, those setting out, those willing to be changed on the way. They do not yet know what the city will bring, but they pilgrim anyway. They journey with prayer on their lips, longing in their hearts, and hope in their feet.

It's tempting to think of Advent as a solo journey, as something internal and reflective, and it is, in part, but Psalm 122 reminds us that this season is also communal. We move together. We worship together. We long together. And we pray for peace not only in ourselves, but in the places we live, in the communities we share, in the world we're still learning how to love.

The Magi did not make their journey alone. And when they were warned in a dream to take another way home, they took that road together. We do the same. Advent gives us companions on the path and songs to carry as we go.

By now, the theme of interruption should feel familiar. It shows up in Jesus' call to stay awake. It rises in Isaiah's vision of a world being remade in the middle of real danger. It echoes through the psalmist's voice, sung by people still on the road, walking toward the presence of God. Advent is threaded with these holy interruptions. They are not distractions.

They are invitations. They call us to stop, to listen, to shift our posture before we even begin to move.

We tend to think of God's arrival as something dramatic. Something unmistakable. But throughout scripture and throughout our own lives, it often begins in quiet ways. A conversation we didn't expect. A longing that shows up in the middle of the day. A realization that something in us is ready to change. God interrupts by presence. And we are invited to notice.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the days of Noah, when people were eating and drinking, marrying and working, moving through life with no sense that anything needed to change. On the surface, it sounds ordinary. But beneath the routine was a deep inattentiveness, a refusal to see how their actions affected others, a disconnection from what mattered. These were not just distracted people. They were people who had stopped noticing how far they had drifted from the life God intended. Jesus names that kind of spiritual sleep. And he calls us to something different. Not panic, but awareness. Not fear, but readiness. The invitation is to wake up to the sacred within and around us, and to stop living as though nothing is at stake.

Advent is a season that asks us to stay open to interruption. To let our familiar habits be unsettled. To listen again. To clear the noise and leave room for something new to take root. We are being invited. Not pushed away, but drawn closer.

The Magi were interrupted too. They had studied, prepared, and set out on the journey. But it was not study that saved them. It was attention. It was willingness. It was trust. After they encountered Christ, they were warned in a dream to take another way. And they listened. They paid attention. They allowed the interruption to change their course.

This is the moment Advent brings us to: the quiet turning point. The place where the direction of the season, and maybe the direction of our lives, begins to shift. Not because of anything flashy or loud. Simply because we are willing to see it, and to follow where it leads.

We'll come back to the story of the Magi later in the season. For now, I want us to hold this image: strangers under a foreign sky, watching stars, traveling great distances, hoping in something beyond themselves. When they finally stand before the Christ child, they kneel in worship, offering gifts that speak of royalty, worship, and sacrifice. But their story does not end there. In a dream they are warned not to return to Herod. The power of empire wants to claim the child, to corrupt what is holy. So the Magi escape, not by the most obvious path, not by the way everyone else expects them to go. They go home by another way.

That turning is essential. Their encounter with Christ changed them, not just in mind or heart, but in direction. Their worship reshaped their way home. That path became new, even risky. That moment echoes what God often does: meeting us, transforming us, and sending us off differently than we came.

The James Taylor song "Home by Another Way" captures that echo. It draws on the Gospel account, but also repaints it in everyday language: "Maybe me and you can be wise guys too and go home by another way."

For us today, at the beginning of Advent, this is a powerful invitation. We are not yet in Bethlehem. We are not yet at a stable or a manger. We are at the threshold of the journey, with only a single candle lit, holding expectations and anxieties, hopes and doubts. The road ahead is unknown, perhaps even a little dangerous. But the Gospel tells us: God leads. A star guides. A dream warns. And those who follow find themselves called to travel not the obvious path, but the faithful one.

James Taylor's *Home by Another Way* retells the story of the Magi with a kind of wry reverence. It's not flashy or dramatic. It's thoughtful and grounded, with just enough edge to make you pay attention. He doesn't paint the Magi as flawless sages, but as people trying to follow the light and stay out of trouble. He names the danger. He nods to the absurdity of Herod's fear. And then he leaves us with something simple but sharp: if you're paying attention, and you've met something holy, maybe you don't go back the way you came. Maybe you turn. Maybe the wiser way is the quieter one. The path that isn't obvious. The one that leads you somewhere different than you planned.

If Advent is a season of waiting, may it also be a season of turning: turning our minds from certainty to hope, our habits from routine to attention, our lives from comfort to courage. May this candle that burns now point us toward that new way. May we hear in the song what the season itself keeps trying to teach us. That wisdom sometimes looks like subtle course correction. That faith often moves quietly, in dreams and decisions made on the edge of things. And that those who pay attention just might find themselves going home by another way.