The Need for Advent
Genesis 3:1-15; Galatians 4:4-7

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, this period when, as the church, we prepare our hearts for Christmas and to celebrate the coming of Christ. And this year, over the Sundays of Advent we're going to look at the Promise of Advent, the Foreshadowing of Advent, the Announcement of Advent and then, on Christmas Day, the Fulfilment of Advent.

But we're going to start by looking at the Need for Advent. And I say 'need' with just a hint of caution. Because in the build up to Christmas you're going to be told you need all sorts of things: that new gadget, that special food, or expensive experience, and if you don't have it your Christmas or, worse still, your loved one's Christmas, is going to be ruined.

When in reality, you might *want* them, but you don't really *need* them. So, the danger of calling this 'The Need for Advent' is overselling Christmas.

Except, Advent's different, whether you want it or not.

The False Promise
When I went away to university for the first time, my mother did two things. Number one, she replaced me with a dog. But number two, she offered to buy me a car. Now, admittedly, that was so I'd be able to come home and see her, but even so it was incredibly generous. But we knew nothing about cars, so we found an advert for a little Renault 5 which sounded great, and went to see. And the owner said it was in excellent condition. And he knew lots about cars, and did all his own maintenance and said that if ever I had any problems I just had to give him a call, and he'd fix it for me. So we thought - this is too good to be true, and bought it!

And it was too good to be true and within a day, every time I turned the key in the ignition, it would make these horrible screeching noises that would make anyone walking past go 'what was that?' So I rang him up, and the guy did not want to know. He'd promised everything and I'd been sold a dud.

Look at today's passage. Because the first chapters of Genesis don't just give us an account of human origins, but the Bible's explanation for the origins of sin: how a good world has gone so badly wrong. So look at v1: 'Now the serpent was *more crafty* than any other beast.' What does it mean to be crafty? It doesn't mean you're good at making lovely floral decorations for your Christmas table, does it? One dictionary defines it as being clever, but in a dishonest way. Of achieving one's aims but by deceitful means.

And in deceiving someone, you want them to believe something you know's not true. Like 'this car's a gem' or 'invest in this, the returns are going to go through the roof'.

And from Eden onwards, the Bible warns us of what you know by experience - that craftiness can have a corrosive impact on our lives. That one of the major ways temptation works is through deceitfulness: because it promises you something it cannot deliver. Or, it promises you something but only tells you half the truth, the positive and not the negative. Or, like an elderly aunt who invites herself round for a cup of tea at the end of November, but arrives with suitcases and stays until Christmas, temptation might deliver, but it comes with a whole load of unwanted baggage.

And so in his parable of the sower, Jesus says one of *the* major things that hinders our fruitfulness in life is '*the deceitfulness* of riches' (Matt 13:22). If you can just earn more, or have more, life will be better, you'll be happier, doors to great experiences will be opened. So we work for it, get it, but find it doesn't quite work. And we can think, 'it's because I don't have enough, I need more.' And we find ourselves on a treadmill of getting but never getting satisfaction.

Or the apostle Paul talks of us being corrupted by 'deceitful *desires*' (Eph 4:22). That in addition to money there is a practically limitless list of things we can want so much, thinking if I have it I'll be happy, only to experience the great let down. Which is why the writer to the Hebrews urges his readers not to 'be hardened by the *deceitfulness* of *sin*' (Heb 3:13). And sin is deceitful and has a hardening effect on our hearts, because it promises us the good life, but slowly and steadily drives us away from what is truly good. And as it does, and as time and again it fails to deliver it make us steadily more and more cynical of life.

And so if in the Garden, Adam and Eve found themselves facing the subtle assault of a crafty and deceitful enemy, we all do. It's the false promise, 'this will be great' and you find you've been sold a dud.

Ok, but look how the serpent works his deceit. He comes to the woman and says, v1, "Did God *actually* say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden'?" 'I mean, *really*? That is so regressive and repressive. He clearly doesn't want the best for you. All these petty rules, you can't do this, can't do that. Always trying to constrain you and stop *you* being *you*. You would be much better off being rid of him and striking out on your own. That's the truly courageous thing to do.'

And he gets her to question the goodness of God, *and* the goodness of God's word for her life.

But, of course, God had not said they couldn't eat from *any* tree in the garden, just the one. But rather than let them see God as the generous, abundant provider that he is, the one who knows boundaries are necessary if you're going to truly thrive, the serpent makes God seem a narrow-minded kill joy. It's the same argument used in our post-Christian, secular culture.

So the woman tries to correct him. She tells him they can eat from the trees, just not the one in the middle, because if they do that they'll die. To which the serpent responds, v4, "You will not surely die." 'Look', he says 'this stuff God's said to you about consequences if you behave like this or that, believe me, he's having you on. There won't be any consequences, not negative ones anyway.'

Instead, he tells her, *good* will come if they go down this path. Verse 5, "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good from evil."

And just like them, when temptation comes knocking like a door to door salesman, we're also sold the line 'there will be no negative consequences'.

Now, have you ever given or received a Christmas present where you knew there *would* be consequences? Maybe good consequences. One of the things our girls like to do is give a *bon*, a promise, for a present - I promise to take you for a picnic, or hiking, and we'll spend the day together. Those are promises with great, intended, seen-up-front consequences. Or, when our girls were younger, every year my brother deliberately bought them the most irritatingly noisy Christmas presents he could find. Like something with an electronic jingle you couldn't turn off, or a game

where you hit something, and when you did it let out the kind of sounds that just got under your skin. And he did it knowing what it would mean for our Christmas Day. Intended, seen-up-front consequences.

But temptation works by hiding the consequences. Maybe you're stressed, and you go on line and click on something thinking it'll relieve your stress, but find yourself going back repeatedly, in ways that become controlling and ultimately increase your stress. Maybe you allow yourself to get emotionally close to a colleague at work because they're showing interest in you and it feels good but it unleashes problems you never expected or wanted. Or social media offers you the chance to put yourself out there and feel good about yourself, but instead you find yourself caught in the comparison game and your mental health suffers.

Or as we saw earlier, maybe you hear the promises of having more, but you end up feeling less content and experiencing more conflict in relationships than ever. In fact, research suggests that though we are the wealthiest generation ever, we're also the unhappiest. We have more; what we don't have is peace, contentment or wholeness.

And the question is, why not? Because it's not as if everything we desire, or are tempted by is wrong. St Augustine wrote, even those things that *are* wrong have 'a flawed reflection of beauty.' In some way they mirror what is right. In fact, Genesis wants you to see just how good the fruit looked to the woman: v6, 'So when the woman saw that the tree was *good* for food, and that it was a *delight* to the eyes, and that the tree was to be *desired* to make one wise, she took of the fruit and ate.'

But beautiful though it was, in taking she lost something far more beautiful. And it's *that* loss that explains our emptiness and our need for Advent.

The Harsh Reality

So, having been promised they would become like God, and for the first time really be able to see and decide for themselves what's right and wrong, they experience the cold reality. They discover that, like a scorpion comes with a sting in its tail, so does sin: Verse 7, 'Then the eyes of both *were* opened, *and they knew that they were naked*.'

And that's not just a loss of innocence. That's the loss of feeling ok in your own skin, of that unquestioned sense of worth that has nothing to do with pride and everything to do with knowing you are loved and accepted, with a unique place in the universe. But in place of that comes shame, and with it the need to hide, and present a better image of yourself than the real you.

But they don't just hide their true selves from each other. Verse 8: 'They heard the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and the woman hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God.'

What traditions do you have at Christmas? As a family, we have loads, and one of them is that before there is any unwrapping of presents, after lunch on Christmas Day everyone has to wrap up warm and go for a walk. And what typically happens is the young ones go on ahead, while Su and I lag behind and chat with our guests, because walking with a friend, and escaping all the noise is great, isn't it?

And the implication of v8, as Adam and Eve recognise the sound of God walking in the garden, is that that is what they got to enjoy every evening. Like kids hiking with their dad, or friends walking with their Friend, they got to walk with God.

But this day is different. They hear the familiar sound… and hide.

Now, if realising their nakedness is a tragic portrayal of the loss innocence and self-worth, what does hiding from God say about the impact of sin on their relationship with God? Because, closeness, intimacy and friendship have been replaced by distance, by a desire to keep God at arm's length, to not face him but instead hide from him.

And maybe you know what that feels like. Maybe you're not yet a Christian, but you know there's a God, and you know you're distant from him. And sometimes you want to close the gap, but how are you supposed to do it?

But if you are a Christian, you almost certainly *also* experience this distance. You do something you know you shouldn't, or don't do something you know you should, and it's as if your relationship with God freezes. And unless you deal with that issue, distance and coldness creeps in. As the writer to the Hebrews might put it, the first hints of hardness set in.

Ok, but look at Adam's explanation in v10, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, *and I was afraid*."

Now, if I were to ask you 'what are you afraid of?', what would you reply? Spiders? Heights? Father Christmas, breaking into your house at night? Whatever we might say, Adam's expressing something deeper. A relationship of awe and wonder, of love and unquestioning trust, has been trashed and now there's a wariness, a suspicion, an anxiety: 'how will I be treated?'

Think how that marks so much of human life. Think how much of our politics, or parenting, or decision making is based on fear. Or a suspicion of others. Or of seeing the universe as adversarial and dangerous. You see, once our relationship with God is broken and the knowledge that God is good, and for us, is lost, fear becomes a daily reality.

But of course it wasn't just their relationship with God that lay broken. God asks Adam, v11, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" And Adam replies, v12, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

Notice the blame shifting: *the woman* made me do it. Now, why can we be slow to take responsibility for our actions, or acknowledge our failures? Often it's because we fear how others might see us or treat us if we do, and so we look for others to blame. But that blaming and accusing is a root of so much relational breakdown.

And, tragically, this time of year is not immune. One of the consequences of how consumerised Christmas has become is that, instead of 'peace on earth and good will to all men', financial and relational strains can increase, and expectations can go unmet, and comparisons with what others are getting or doing are made, and it becomes a time of conflict, as we look for whose to blame.

But of course, it's not limited to Christmas. Whether it's divorce rates or political polarisation, or war, the impact of blaming and relational breakdown are everywhere.

But notice, Adam does not just blame Eve. It's not just *any* woman who made him do it, but "the woman whom *you* gave to be with me." And when life is not going the way we want, or we're facing consequences for our bad choices, it's not just others we blame. We can also find ourselves blaming God, because he's not giving me the life I want, or deserve; the life I think he owes me.

And yet, what this passage makes clear is, it's not God who owes us, it's us who owe him. But it also tells us why life so often doesn't go the way we want. God says to Adam, "Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain shall you eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you" (Gen 3:17-18). So it's not just relationships that are broken, the world is. And the garden has become a weed patch, and stuff doesn't work like it should, plans don't come to fruition, and work can be frustrating. And not just humanity but creation itself is out of sync with the Creator.

But if it tells us the harsh reality, it also tells us that it's God who has a plan to do something about it.

The Great Hope!
I think it would be fair to say that all the major religions and popular psychology and spirituality, share one thing in common: and that is that to fix what's wrong with the world, we have to do it. Whether it's the noble eightfold path of Buddhism, or the five pillars of Islam, or the 12 Laws of Life, there's a recognition that the world is broken, we're a part of the problem and it's down to us to fix it. It might start with something as simple as 'stand up straight with your shoulders back' but the initiative lies with us.

Christianity is different. And it stands alone because it says that while the world is broken and we're a part of the problem, it's God who's taken the initiative.

Now maybe you've seen one of those TV programs where the CEO of a big company pitches up at work as a cleaner or a customer, to see what the problems are really like. Well this season of Advent tells you, God has done that and more. In Christ's birth, he hasn't just pitched up on the shop floor to experience what it's like to be you, he's come to put things right.

But that begins right back in the Garden. Right back at the start, when humanity, in Adam and Eve, first turn away from God it's God who comes in search of them: v9, 'But the Lord God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?"

So whereas other religions and modern spirituality tells you to search for the divine, the Bible says that right from the beginning, God's been searching for you and calling out to you, "Where are you?"

But notice what else he says. As he passes judgment, he first addresses the serpent, and in cursing it says, v15, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." In other words, from Eve onwards, a seed is going to be passed from one generation to another, until an offspring of a woman comes to do battle with the sin and evil at the root of all our problems. It's why Matthew Henry, the

great puritan writer, describes God's judgement here as 'the dawning of the gospel day' because just as darkness is about to descend, God promises a much brighter day is coming - when One will come who will bruise the serpent's head, but in the process he too will be bruised.

And the rest of the Bible traces the line of that seed through great patriarchs like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob; through tribal fathers like Judah and mighty kings like David. The kind of line you might expect a great warrior to come from. Except it's not all like that - because the line is also traced through unloved wives like Leah, rejected women like Tamar, and excluded foreigners brought into the people of God, like Ruth. And in making that the Offspring's line, it's as if God is saying, through this One, come to fight the greatest of battles, I am going to put right all the messed-up-ness, all the brokenness, all the alienation of your lives.

And then he comes. And when Luke gives us the genealogy, the line of the seed, he traces it all the way back to Adam, to the Garden: 'Jesus… the son of Adam, the son of God' (Luke 3:23, 38).

Listen to how Paul puts it: 'When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons' (Gal 4:4-5).

'When the fullness of time had come' - after all that time, from that fateful day in the Garden, to that momentous night in Bethlehem, when a young woman gives birth in a stable, in God's perfect time his plan of redemption swings into action, and His Son, come to do battle with the serpent, is born.

Because that's what Advent is all about. Paul says Jesus was born 'to redeem those under the law.' And to redeem means to buy back and in particular to buy back from slavery. To pay the price that buys a slave's freedom.

And that's why we need Advent. Because we too need rescuing, redeeming for the cycle of sin and deceitful desires and hiding and shame that keep us enslaved.

But we also need rescuing from something else, Paul says - it's God's law. The law that tells us how far we have fallen, how stuck and broken we are, and that we're powerless to do anything about it.

But as the hymn says, the second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came. And he lived the perfect life Adam and all of us fail to live. When he was tempted he didn't cave. Instead, at the cross he gave his life and died the death we all deserved to die. And in crushing satan he was crushed, but for our iniquities, that we might be made whole. So that, as Paul says, 'we might receive adoption as sons.'

If you're not yet a Christian you don't need to stay distant, he invites you to come and have your relationship with your heavenly Father restored. And if you are a Christian, however distant you feel, know you are chosen and loved, because you're redeemed.

So if the problem starts in Eden, and tells us we need a solution, Advent tells us it's Christ, and he's come.