

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
First Sunday of Advent – December 3, 2023
Matthew 21:1-9 – The Coming King
Rev Peter Wagner

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

Advent is a time of waiting, anticipation, and preparation. But waiting for what? Christmas? Getting ready to sing beautiful carols and celebrate a baby in a manger? Yes, that's partly true. Advent is about preparing our hearts to worship the Christ child, to marvel that God would come down for us and give himself for us. That's lovely and beautiful, and we eagerly look forward to it.

But Christmas is not what we chiefly await. Christmas happened long ago. As joyous and wonderful good news as it is that God became man and dwelt among us, it already happened. What makes Christmas wonderful is that God still comes to us now and dwells with us in the flesh, in the church. But anticipation and preparation are for the future. The best is yet to come.

Advent means coming. And Advent is about not just one, but three comings of Christ. His coming in the flesh as a baby at Bethlehem, certainly. But also his coming in grace to the church now, and his coming in glory on the Last Day. Jesus first came as a baby, in the flesh to give up his flesh. And he redeemed us then so he might come to us now and give us his flesh in his word and sacrament. And when he comes today in the church, he comes to prepare us for the Last Day, so we might be counted righteous when he comes again in glory.

That final coming of Christ is the climax. What we chiefly long for, what we prepare for and anticipate. The Day of the Lord, when he comes to judge the nations and create new heavens and a new earth. "Our hope and expectation, O Jesus, now appear. Arise, O Sun so longed for, o'er this benighted sphere. With hearts and hands uplifted, we plead, O Lord, to see, the day of earth's redemption that sets Your people free!" This is our Advent prayer. God's coming in the past at Christmas, and his coming to us now in the church, these are all in preparation for his future final coming.

And Advent beautifully weaves all three comings together. It takes us from the end times theme of the last few Sundays of the church year, from the Last Day, and it moves us back toward the beginning, back through his coming in word and sacrament now in the church, all the way back to Bethlehem, to Christmas and his incarnation, born of the virgin Mary for our salvation.

Perhaps this is why Advent starts out, oddly enough, with Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday captures all three comings. His first coming is clear when he rides into Jerusalem humble and mounted on a donkey, coming to his people in the flesh as a man, in the same humility of the baby of Bethlehem. Obedient unto death, to give his life as a ransom for many.

But on Palm Sunday, his coming to us now, is also there. "Behold your king is coming to you!" Not history, but now. Not to someone else, to you. Behold, your king is coming to you now, to give you his flesh and blood, to lead you into his kingdom, the church.

And finally, Palm Sunday is a glorious coming. Though he rides in hidden majesty, he rides in triumph to a kingly coronation. Though his crown will be of thorns, and his throne a cross, yet he comes in glory to save. And the crowd rejoices and hails their king, "Hosanna to the Son of David, Hosanna in the highest." Hosanna, save us now. Just as he will come in glory to save his people on the Last Day.

Almost no one noticed his first coming at Bethlehem. It was a marvelous advent, proclaimed by angels, marked by a star. But it was hidden, veiled, just as God was hidden and concealed in the humble form of a baby, just as God dwells among us as Immanuel in quiet humility. Except for a few shepherds in the fields, and a couple believers in the temple, and a few wise men from the east, no one noticed Christmas.

They missed him, even though they sought him. For they were eagerly awaiting the Messiah. More eagerly than we do today. Unlike today, they understood the Scriptures. They knew he must be a great king and savior. They knew he was coming and they believed it. They did everything possible to be ready. Their only mistake was they assumed he would be an earthly king, to bring earthly salvation from the Romans. They looked for military might, not power to cast out Satan and redeem the world from sin.

And though they missed his coming as a baby, on Palm Sunday, they almost got it. They went out to meet their king, rejoicing in their Savior. They spread their garments as he entered his capital city, they welcomed and praised and worshiped him. They looked to him for righteousness and salvation, they almost got it.

But on that day, they did not understand that Jesus was coming to die. He rode in silence. He alone of all the crowd opened not his mouth. Like a lamb before the shearers he was silent. God came as a hidden king, in gentleness and love, to save them by his blood.

Ride on, ride on in majesty. In lowly pomp ride on to die. The King of kings rides into Jerusalem in order to stumble out these same gates a few days later, carrying his cross. He rides through these gates to die under the ironic inscription, "The King of the Jews."

But the crowds did not know the hour of their visitation. As soon as they saw he had not come to drive out the Romans, they lost interest. They cried out, "Crucify him!"

Let us not miss the day of his coming. Let us know the hour of our visitation, to be ready when he returns. For the God who came hidden as a baby, the humble king who came to die on Palm Sunday, he will surely come again. Not hidden, not concealed. Every eye shall see him, every tongue confess his name. And every mouth will give an account. None shall hide from his presence, none shall escape his justice.

So we must be ready. Awake. More ready than we are today, in our casual approach to church, and to God's word. We must be more alert and eager even than the Jews, who so eagerly awaited his day of coming, but still missed it.

For we are no better. We daily miss his coming. We daily fail to receive him now, in his word and sacrament. His coming in the church is so mundane, so ordinary. We take it for granted. Yet this is the coming that matters most. This is how he comes to us, to prepare us for the Last Day. Behold your king is coming to you now. Humble and speaking through a pastor. Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the incarnate Deity, humble and lying in the palm of your hand in simple wafer of bread.

Already he reigns triumphant at the right hand of the Father, filling all things, but you cannot see him there. You see him here in his bride the church, through his means of grace.

But the church is disheveled. Divided into denominations, failing to reflect the love and humility of Christ. As unimpressive she appears, do not miss his coming here. For behold, even here in our frailty, our king is with us in the flesh. Not in wrath, but filled with mercy and pity. He comes to us in word and sacrament to bring us to repentance, free us from our sins, cleanse us and prepare us for his final day. Now is the day of salvation, here is where it takes place.

So repent and change your hearts. Live in humility that befits sons and daughters of the king. Walk properly as in the daytime. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh. Do not miss his coming now. Repent and get ready with shouts of Hosanna, "Lord, save us now."

He came as a humble baby at Bethlehem, and he came on a humble donkey on Palm Sunday. He died as the humble king on a cross, and he comes to you now in a humble rural church in his means of grace, all for one great purpose. To save you, so that when he comes to you in power and great glory on the Last Day, when every eye beholds him, then you shall not perish. For those who miss his visitation now, it will be a day of wrath. But for those who waited in faith, it will be the day of expectation fulfilled, hope come true, waiting finally over.

Come soon, Lord Jesus. Come and save us now. Hosanna to the Son of David! Come and reign as our King. Come take your crown and glory, and ride to your coronation. Reign eternally. Rescue us from our enemies. Rescue us from Satan and all his schemes. Rescue us from our sins and our feeble straying hearts. Come set your people free. Fill us with joy to live in your kingdom forever. Hosanna in the highest! Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.