

The 1st Sunday in Advent
November 29, 2009
Matthew 21:1-9 (Jeremiah 23:5-8 • Romans 13:11-14)

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"Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."

From the Old Testament prophet Zechariah, chapter 9, verse 9:

*Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you.
Righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)*

Today is not only the Sunday after Thanksgiving... It's also the 1st Sunday in Advent—the beginning of a new year according to the Church's calendar (which marks time a little differently than the secular calendar).

In the minds of most people, already with Thanksgiving—but now *certainly* with the 1st Sunday in Advent—the Holiday Season has begun! We are looking forward to Christmas and all the traditions that lead up to it. Here at St. John's, we continue to bask in the glow of the dedication of our marvelous new building last Sunday, and are excited about all the ways that we will use it beginning with the annual Women's League Christmas Bazaar and Luncheon this Friday.

And so we joyfully join our hearts and minds with that chorus in today's Gospel, and with the Old Testament prophecy from which it comes, in Zechariah chapter nine. We join our voices with that Word of God immortalized in Handel's "Messiah," and we exult:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!"

Today is a joyful First Sunday in Advent, and a Happy New Year's Day in the life of the Church!

And this Gospel of our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem, which is also the Gospel for Palm Sunday—our Lord's final entrance into Jerusalem to complete His mission of redeeming the world by His suffering and death—[this Gospel] ties Advent and Holy Week together. It reminds us that Jesus came into the world at Bethlehem for a sacrificial purpose. The joyful coming that we celebrate at Christmas, and toward which we turn our attention during Advent wasn't an end in itself, but moved toward the cross and climax of His coming into the world.

But even as we hear this Advent Gospel of our Lord's entrance into Jerusalem, and the people's joyful welcome, we must also confess that we come here today—we enter this Advent Season, this Holiday Season, this New Church Year—weighed down by sin and its consequences.

In today's Epistle, which continues a theme heard during the preceding final Sundays of the Church year, St. Paul reminds us that *"salvation is nearer to us now than when we first*

believed.” And so he urges us to be continually prepared (not just for Christmas, but) for our Savior’s final coming, by casting off the works of darkness such as those named in Romans 13: *quarreling, jealousy, drunkenness, sexual immorality, sensuality, and the like.*

And to that we could add a whole host of others—all those sins which cling to us and so easily entangle us in our race toward the finish line... those sins which are accusing you today, and cause you guilt. When Jeremiah says in today’s Old Testament lesson that the Lord will raise up a righteous Branch who “*shall execute justice and righteousness,*”... it’s a terrifying thought... the thought of being found naked, exposed in our sin, and left on our own to justify ourselves before God when the King shall come, on the Last Day, to execute justice and righteousness.

Yes, we enter this Advent season joyfully anticipating the celebration of Christ’s coming at Bethlehem, but also weighed down by sin and its consequences.

But God’s good news to you on this First Sunday in Advent, is that your King does not come ultimately to judge you! Rather, as Zechariah says, “*Your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation!*” This is how and why He came into the world as a baby in Bethlehem. And this is how He came to the cross at Calvary—full of righteousness... the righteousness that is His by right, as the Son of God and Very God Himself... the righteousness that He earned by His perfect obedience to the Law and will of God... the righteousness that He won by laying down His innocent life into death at the hands of sinners.

This is the same righteousness and salvation that Jesus comes to deliver to you today and every day in your Baptism. It is His own righteousness that He gives you today in His Church—the daughter of Jerusalem—that worships Him singing,

“Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Here in His Church, the assembly to which He has called us in Holy Baptism, our Lord who is righteous and having salvation, gives us His righteousness and salvation through the preaching and hearing of His Word, and through His freeing Word of forgiveness which wipes clean our slate of sins and keeps us connected to our Baptism and all the gifts Christ gives therein.

But this Advent Gospel of our Lord’s entrance into Jerusalem humble, and mounted on a donkey reminds us that He does His great work of giving us His salvation and righteousness, HIDDEN under the mask of scandal and humility. As we heard last Sunday from Rev. Harrison, the marvelous things that the Lord does in and through His Church don’t always look so impressive, do they? Listen again to how Pastor Harrison put it:

“The Lord gives us difficulties and challenges to keep us humble. We have his glory, we have his forgiveness. But... all the challenges that you face in this place... the challenges of the neighborhood, the challenges of the community in this place, [the challenges of supporting the ministry, I might add]... you shall always do it finally in weakness... The Lord prefers to work His glory most gloriously through people who are inglorious.”

And that way of God’s working applies not only to His working through sinful people and challenging circumstances in the Church. It applies also to the very scandal of the cross itself, by which our Lord earned our salvation. And it applies to the Means of Grace He has chosen to deliver that salvation.

The contemporary German Lutheran theologian Oswald Bayer has said it this way, speaking of God's Word of forgiveness which He places into the mouths of human beings to speak—Christian to Christian, pastor to people—Bayer says:

“When a human being assures me of the forgiveness of sins in the name of God, God himself has forgiven me in that very act and at that very moment. The human word is not just an indication of the divine Word, but it is actually the Word of God. God's Word comes *as* a human word—that is its humiliation. Just as God becomes human in Mary's womb, thus he comes to the sinner in the Word, which is spoken to him by another human being in the name of God.”¹

“Behold, your king is coming to you,” O people of St. John's. He is coming again today humble, and mounted on the bread and wine of His Holy Supper. He is coming to you righteous, and having salvation, to deliver those very same Gospel gifts to you, that He earned in humility on the cross.

Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Amen.

¹ Oswald Bayer. “Martin Luther's Theology: A Contemporary Interpretation,” p. 270.