

Advent's Good News

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Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Let me begin by wishing everyone a Happy New Year!

No, it's not January 1, 2026! But this Sunday is the first Sunday of Advent, and Advent is the opening season of the church year — or as it's also called, the *liturgical year*. The different seasons of the church year, as observed in Lutheran churches and many others, are governed by a liturgical calendar. From this calendar the dates when the seasons begin and end are taken, especially important days are identified, colors for altar hangings and clergy vestments are noted, and Scripture lessons are selected.

For these readings Lutheran churches in the United States follow a special version of what's called the Revised Common Lectionary, published by Vanderbilt University in Nashville and used by several denominations. For most Sundays the lectionary offers readings from the Old Testament, the Psalms, the New Testament Epistles, and the Gospels. It provides these readings in a three-year cycle, so the same lessons typically come back every three years. We just finished Year C of the cycle, and we're beginning again with Year A.

What's the value of a lectionary? By providing several readings each week from all parts of the Bible, it exposes us to a broader range of the contents of the Word of God. Without such a lectionary a preacher might be tempted to just ride his personal hobby horses, and preach only on his favorite passages week after week neglecting what Scripture itself calls "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). The Bible is a rich collection; its writings approach issues of our faith from many angles. We can miss out on its abundance of insights if we aren't careful to explore across the entire spectrum of the Scriptural witness.

So today we're starting afresh on our pilgrimage through Scripture as we begin with the first Sunday of Advent. But what about those seasons of the church year — Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Eastertide, Ascension, Pentecost, ending with the glory of Christ the King (which was last Sunday)? Each of these seasons is denoted by its special color in many churches like ours. What is their purpose?

I would suggest one purpose is to take us on a journey through the life and work of our Savior, Jesus the Messiah. We anticipate his coming, celebrate his birth, immerse ourselves in his teaching and healing, ponder his crucifixion, rejoice in his resurrection, glory in his ascension, grow through the work of his Holy Spirit in our lives, and proclaim his Lordship over all things! The church year, with its seasons, is a powerful teaching tool that helps us to understand what faith in Jesus is all about, and motivates us to align our lives with his purpose as he does his work in us.

So let's take a closer look at the season of Advent, upon which we now enter. For many Christians in our culture, Advent is merely a preparation for Christmas — as it is, of course, for people in general. We assemble a Christmas gift list, plan Christmas events, break out the carol songbooks, pull the Christmas tree out of storage, attend special concerts, watch "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" for the umpteenth time, and the like. Of course Walmart and every other store have already put out their Christmas merchandise, even before Hallowe'en! I heard a comedian tell about the time he visited Walmart in September and found the Christmas display already in place. He asked the service desk, "Do you sell calendars here?" He was told, "Yes, we do," to which he replied, "Does anyone here know how to read one?" As believers we may be disgusted with the commercialization of Christmas, but if we're not careful we can fall into a similar trap, using the season of Advent simply as a time to get ready for the family times, community and church events, and gift-giving we associate with the Christmas season.

Obviously Advent means more than just getting into "the Christmas spirit" with everything that goes along with that. To discover what this season is really about, we need to turn to the lectionary I mentioned earlier and consider the lessons appointed for today.

In our Gospel reading from Matthew 24 we hear Jesus telling his disciples, "But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. For as were the

days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (24:36-37). Traditionally, Advent is understood to be a time of looking forward to the coming of Jesus, not at his birth in Bethlehem but his coming as “the ruler of kings on earth,” as the Revelation to John puts it.

That’s what Advent means, “coming to us.” And this season is a time when we turn our attention to God’s long-range plan for the renewal of his creation which comes in its fullness with the appearance of Jesus. The Bible, we see, when taken as a whole comes full circle. It begins in Genesis with God dwelling in a garden paradise with man and woman, and it ends in the Revelation with God once again dwelling with his people in the renewed earth (21:3), where the Lord God and the Lamb are the focus of worship (21:22).

Scripture always looks forward to that day when the effects of human sin will be undone and, as the prophet Habakkuk says, “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Habakkuk 2:14). The Scriptures are driving us onward, not to heaven but to God’s redeemed creation. Heaven is like a holding pattern, a space we pass through on our way to where God intends for us to eventually wind up. As Peter says, “According to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13). The Advent we look for is the coming of the Lord Jesus to build out that new era to its full extent. As the Nicene Creed states, “He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.”

And Scripture shows us God’s plan for how his righteous rule begins to take effect. As the prophet Isaiah states in our first lesson, “Many peoples shall come, and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.’ For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:3-4).

It’s through the influence of the worship and teaching of God’s people, the church of Jesus, that the righteous rule of the Lord begins to emerge. Let’s recall that the New Testament understands the body of Christian believers as the new “Zion” or “Jerusalem.” As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews writes to his fellow believers, “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (12:22). In his letter to the Galatians the apostle Paul says that “the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” (4:26). In other words, what Isaiah says about the word of the Lord going forth to bring about the righteous and peaceful rule of God is applicable to the work and witness of the church, the body of Christ. That’s why we can say, with the Psalmist, “I was glad when they said to me, ‘Let us go to the house of the LORD!’” (Psalm 122:1). It’s an experience of great joy to be part of the one organization dedicated to broadcasting the word of God across this needy and sinful world.

If we doubt that God’s word, as proclaimed by the church, has any effect on the righteousness of our culture, we need to take the long-range view. The ancient Roman world in which the church emerged was a world of unspeakable violence, cruelty and hardship for most people. But in his book *Who Is This Man?* John Ortberg has shown how two thousand years of the history of the Western world reveal the beneficial impact of Scripture’s message of healing, prosperity, and justice. Regions of the world dominated by Christian influence have seen the development of hospitals and charitable organizations, institutions for research and learning, and efforts to promote the public good to an extent not seen elsewhere. The rights of the individual, valued by God as a creature in his own image, have become a cornerstone of Western culture leading to such milestones as the abolition of slavery and the guarantee of free speech. Industrial initiative and the results of technology have, on the whole, benefited people across the spectrum of society. Poverty has diminished, pestilence has been curbed, and people have been set free to explore their possibilities in life to a degree not seen in parts of the world where the message of the Bible hasn’t been widely proclaimed. We acknowledge the awful things that happened in Europe in the last century, but whereas in ancient times such evil was taken for granted, in our era most people are horrified by such things and work against them.

So Advent, with its emphasis on the coming reign of Jesus over all things, should remind us that the word of God has indeed been going forth from the place of worship and it has had its good effect. At the same time Advent issues a warning: be ready for the coming of our Lord, do not fall into complacency and

indifference. Jesus warned his disciples about this danger, in our Gospel reading from Matthew: “Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (24:42). Paul the apostle echoes this admonition when he tells the Roman believers, “You know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand” (Romans 13:11-12).

Even as we know that God is working out his purpose in human history, and is building a new creation “in which righteousness dwells,” we also know that he calls us to faithful witness to the plan he has for the redemption of the world. Through prayer, through worship, through deeds of mercy, through involvement in just causes, through an honest and upright life, through support of the church and its message of renewal and hope, we testify to the Advent of our Lord. We are imperfect creatures, subject to all the weaknesses of our human nature. But the story of Advent is not about us, it’s about Jesus and what he can and will do to bring to reality the vision of a transformed world, a world in which all things are made new and sorrow and pain and every effect of human sin must pass away (Revelation 21:4-5).

This is the gospel, the “good news” we don’t often hear, because we tend to get preoccupied with our personal needs for forgiveness and salvation and forget about God’s grander plan for the redemption and renewal of his creation. The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord and is working toward God’s pattern for human history, and we’re invited to get on board with that program! As Paul put it when preaching to the assembled elite of Athens, “He has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (Acts 17:31). Judgment doesn’t just mean approving or condemning a person’s actions, it means *making things right and as they ought to be*. That’s what our Lord is up to, and Advent reminds us he is on the way in order to do that.

But the New Testament is clear that there are certain *things we can do* to witness to that long-term purpose of God. Paul, once again, reminds us that this is really a matter of some urgency. As Jesus said, no one knows when his Advent will occur in its full force. So Paul warns us, “The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime . . . Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires” (Romans 13:12-14).

There is a way we are to live as a testimony to the coming of the Lord, and it’s a testimony to the reality that Jesus, who is coming, is *already with us* through his Holy Spirit. We can’t live that life of righteous witness in ourselves, subject as we are to the sinful tendencies of human nature. So we have to cover that sinfulness by putting on a different garment, and clothe ourselves in Jesus who is always present with us. In many ways the Christian life is really just a “put-on,” in which our sinful hearts are hidden beneath the covering of Messiah Jesus. We’re transformed *not so much from the inside out as from the outside in*, as the life of Jesus we “put on” seeps into our inward being until we become, as Peter says, “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

So if you’ve ever wondered whether you, within yourself, are the Christian believer you ought to be (since you, like me, may have your occasional doubts about that), just remember that the gospel is not about you and me so much as it is about Jesus and what he is doing. We just have to *put him on*, and he will do what he needs to do in us to make us what we ought to be. There is an Advent, a coming, of the Lord Jesus not only upon our world but upon each one of us as we clothe ourselves in his righteousness and witness to what he is doing to bring about the renewal and restoration of his creation.