

The Second Sunday in Advent  
December 5, 2021

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
C: Amen.

**Scripture Readings**

*Malachi 3:1-7b*

“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.

“For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.”

*Philippians 1:2-11*

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

*Luke 3:1-20*

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet,

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness:  
‘Prepare the way of the Lord,

make his paths straight.  
 Every valley shall be filled,  
 and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
 and the crooked shall become straight,  
 and the rough places shall become level ways,  
 and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

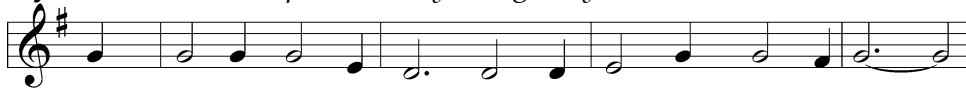
He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

And the crowds asked him, “What then shall we do?” And he answered them, “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise.” Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

As the people were in expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Christ, John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

So with many other exhortations he preached good news to the people. But Herod the tetrarch, who had been reprovved by him for Herodias, his brother's wife, and for all the evil things that Herod had done, added this to them all, that he locked up John in prison.

**Hymn:** *LSB 343, Prepare the Royal Highway*



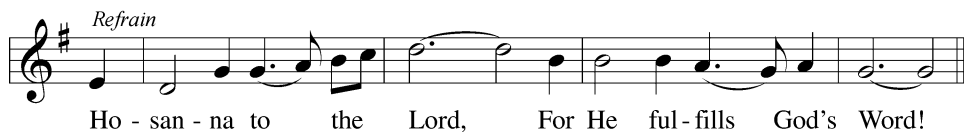
1 Pre - pare the roy - al high - way; The King of kings is near!  
 2 God's peo - ple, see Him com - ing: Your own e - ter - nal king!  
 3 Then fling the gates wide o - pen To greet your prom - ised king!  
 4 His is no earth - ly king - dom; It comes from heav'n a - bove.



Let ev - 'ry hill and val - ley A lev - el road ap - pear!  
 Palm branch - es strew be - fore Him! Spread gar - ments! Shout and sing!  
 Your king, yet ev - 'ry na - tion Its trib - ute too should bring.  
 His rule is peace and free - dom And jus - tice, truth, and love.



Then greet the King of Glo - ry Fore - told in sa - cred sto - ry:  
 God's prom - ise will not fail you! No more shall doubt as - sail you!  
 All lands, bow down be - fore Him! All na - tions, now a - dore Him!  
 So let your praise be sound - ing For kind - ness so a - bound - ing:



## Sermon

There are two wonderful Advent themes that we see in today's reading from Philippians, this letter from St. Paul to the Christians in the city of Philippi. The first is that God is absolutely in control. The second is that we, as believers, are actively engaged in what God is doing. We see this in this letter, and we see it in the backstory behind this letter, and we see this in Advent and what it reminds us about.

So I want to start with reminding you about that backstory. Philippi is a city in what is today part of Greece -- it's the first place that Paul and his fellow missionaries travel to in Europe, after they cross over from what is modern Turkey, a part of Asia. Considering I and most Lutherans are mostly of European heritage, this moment when the Gospel first arrives in Europe is wonderful. Acts chapter 16 tells us all about it: the Holy Spirit guided Paul to that place, almost literally kicking him out of Asia and forcing him over to Philippi. He tried to go another direction, and Acts says "the Spirit would not allow them to," whatever form that might have taken. Paul then has a vision of where they should go.

God is absolutely in control. They come to Philippi by God's clear and direct command. He is in control when the Church is established there; they meet a merchant woman named Lydia, and it says "The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message." Paul gets no credit for going there. Lydia gets no credit for opening her heart. In this reading, Paul reminds them that it's God who began this work in them and it's God who will eventually bring it to completion. Everything happens in line with God's plan and by God actively making it all take place. Jesus once compares the work of the Holy Spirit to the wind blowing, and Paul, Lydia, and others in the early Church are the most successful when they let go and let the Spirit blow them around wherever they ought to be.

God is absolutely in control of all of this. Yet these faithful people are also actively engaged in what God is doing. Paul doesn't decide when and where to go, but you could never say that he wasn't active and enthusiastic in following through with this evangelistic mission. Once the Spirit has opened Lydia's heart and created that seed of faith in her, she then jumps in with both feet and doesn't look back. She and all her household are baptized, and her home becomes the first church location in the city; beyond that she also provides hospitality and place to stay for Paul's missions team and a base of operations for the outreach and evangelism efforts of the whole region.

We see all of this reflected this in the reading today too, as Paul remembers this "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now." I suspect he's remembering Lydia, that first believer, and all she'd done, in this partnership and fellowship in faith from day one. This is business language, which is fitting with Lydia being a successful, well-to-do merchant herself. They are partners, they are participating together in God's grace and what God is doing. Paul is suggesting that these Philippian believers are business partners with him in an entrepreneurial venture he refers to here as "grace." Paul describes his own work as an apostle sent by Jesus with the word "grace;" his business is freely sharing God's gifts. In context, this is probably what he has in mind here. The Philippians have shown, in heart, mind, actions, and finances, they are co-partners in the business of grace, the work of the Kingdom. They're putting their treasure into the Kingdom of God, where moth and rust cannot touch.

God is fully and totally in control, yet we are also actively engaged and participating in the activity of the Gospel here and now. That's the fundamental basis for the words used here: thankfulness, joy, yearning, affection, partnership, and love.

Dr. Justin Rossow says this about this passage: "It also leads to a kind of double evidence, where our faith is tested and proves reliable, while at the same time God's promises are tested and prove reliable. In verse 7, the grace partnership leads to the defense and to the confirmation of the Gospel itself (the word here has to do with something you know is sturdy because you have walked on it. In other words, the proof is in the pudding). In verse 10, it is the Philippian believers who are testing and proving the excellent things (this testing word is used elsewhere in the metallurgic sense of testing with fire). Finally, the believers themselves will be tested and proved reliable at the return of Jesus. Paul is sure their faith is going to be held up in the sunlight and shown to be genuine, and their lives will not cause stumbling to any who walk the narrow way (verse 10). Even this confidence in the final outcome of their active engagement is followed up by a reminder that God is in control. These believers are simply bearing the fruit which comes naturally from being made right with God. The proof is in the pudding, but the pudding does not get any credit: God alone gets the glory."

"These believers are simply bearing the fruit which comes naturally from being made right with God. The proof is in the pudding, but the pudding does not get any credit." The chef gets the credit; God alone gets the glory. God is totally in control, and we are actively engaged.

I certainly feel some parallels with this congregation. The response that Lydia and these others have under her leadership is like the people here, who have always been willing partners in the Church's mission. I've seen this as long as I've been here, but especially in the last year and a half when so many churches have struggled, this church family has supported the church, come back to the church, reached out to people who've been away from the church, welcomed new people into the family of this church. You've sent aid and encouragement to those in Louisiana who suffered from storm damage. This congregation is actively engaged in what God is doing, and while there may always be more that can be done, I can share Paul's joy and thankfulness from the first day here until now.

And God is totally, absolutely in control. All of this work for God that happens here flows out of the work of God that He did first. We see this in the Old Testament reading: God is the one who refines and purifies His people so that they're able to bring righteous offerings to Him. We see this in the Gospel reading: "God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham." We see this in Philippians, "that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ... [to] be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ." Anything we do is simply this "fruit of righteousness" which itself come through Jesus; it is God alone who is in charge.

And here we find a paradox of faithful living. We see it with Paul and the others as the Holy Spirit guided them when and where to go; we are living the most faithfully when we stop trying to guide events and lives according to our own desires or wisdom, when we stop trying to take control, but instead "let go and let God." The paradox is that our active engagement becomes possible when we let go and follow. Our activity in God's kingdom comes when we allow ourselves to be moved by Christ. Spiritual maturity comes from an ever-increasing consciousness of our need for more growth; spiritual richness comes from an ever-increasing awareness of our utter need and dependence.

This leads us back to Advent. The "day of Christ" that Paul talks about means the return of Christ, at some unknown point in our future, coming back to complete the work he has begun. This is a good work for all of Creation, but for us too. Until that day comes, we remember the same two lessons: God is in absolute control of what happens, and in His providence and care we have nothing to fear in the meantime; and until that day comes, He has given us things to do, as we are called to continue being actively engaged in the work of His Church.

It is the natural fruit that grows from faith, and this time of the year perhaps more than any other pushes us to remember the needs of people around us as a part of this active engagement. Scrooge's nephew Fred says in A Christmas Carol that this time of year is "a good time; a kind,

forgiving, charitable, pleasant time." As we keep Christ in Christmas and remember his birth in Bethlehem, we should also remember that he calls us to see himself in all the hungry and cold and needy, and to care for them the way we would care for Jesus. Until the "Day of Christ" there is always a need for the fruit that grows out of faith.

You've heard the expression, "It ain't over until the fat lady sings." In this case, it's "It ain't over till the angels' trumpets sound," it's not over until it's over, when Jesus returns. This shapes our perspective of ourselves, too. God has begun a good work in us, His work that calls us by the Gospel and gives the new birth of faith, that creates in us a new heart, that makes us His beloved children. Yet this good work, the transformation of a dead sinner into a living saint of God, will not reach completion in this life. The best is yet to come; God is not finished with us. By faith we rejoice in what we have already been given; by faith, we hold onto God's promises of what is still to come; by faith we are prepared for anything He calls us to.

### **Lord's Prayer**

**Our Father who art in heaven,  
hallowed be Thy name,  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy will be done on earth  
as it is in heaven;  
give us this day our daily bread;  
and forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those  
who trespass against us;  
and lead us not into temptation,  
but deliver us from evil.**

**For Thine is the kingdom  
and the power and the glory  
forever and ever. Amen.**

**P:** Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

**C:** **Amen.**

**All:** **I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.**

**P:** Let us bless the Lord!

**C:** **Thanks be to God!**

**P:** The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

**C:** **Amen.**