

November 29th, 2020
Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Milan, WI
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Edgar, WI

The First Sunday in Advent

Text: Isaiah 64:1-9

In the Name of the Father and the ✠ Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

How would you describe the season of Advent to somebody who doesn't go to church? Many people would say it is "Pre-Christmas" because that is how most of the country views it. Christmas-y song are already playing in the stores and on the radio, decorations are going up, and the shopping season officially started this weekend, even if it was slightly subdued this year. The world views this time as a lead up to one day, Christmas Day, a day of gift giving and family and traditions. That is wrong and we should not be taking our cues from an unbelieving world. The church year was designed to highlight Jesus' life and ministry and this season is not a placeholder for something else, a spiritual appetizer if you will. It is about His first coming two thousand years ago and also His future coming in glory when all will be judged. The secular version of Advent is like the secular version of Christmas: It falls far short of what it should be, because the Triune God is not at the center. Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, atheists... many of them celebrate the secular Christmas so why not celebrate a secular Advent? Why not dilute one more church festival for the unbelievers, that they can twist into whatever they want, instead of what it should be. Advent means "coming", the arrival of the Christ. To observe it means to observe the historical fact that God acted in history and will again. As Isaiah wrote, **"From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides You, who acts for those who wait for Him."** (v.4)

Perhaps the simplest way to describe Advent is this: God's promises fulfilled. His promises to the patriarchs and prophets and the Apostles. His promised to us. Advent is a reminder that God had a long plan and although it may not play out as quickly as we like, He has been fulfilling it, one promise at a time. That is why so many of the Old Testament readings for Advent are drawn from Isaiah. Isaiah is the Gospel of the Old Testament, rich in promises of what the Christ would do when He came. It was revealed to Isaiah that God Himself would come to His people to save them and wash away their sins. And when He did, the universe would never be the same.

Which is good news for us, because we don't need more of the same. We know nothing but sin, from the moment of our conception to the day of our death. No matter what psychology and political science says, we cannot make a better world by our own two hands. There is no utopia waiting right around the corner, if we just believe hard enough and work hard enough... and give up everything that makes us human. People are still sinners today as they were 3,500 years ago, when Moses got ticked off and broke the stone tablets at the foot of Mount Sinai. In the very shadow of God's holy presence. Although some of us do want to serve God, we cannot help but fail again and again. No matter how many times we "start over", no matter how many times we promise to do better, we lose the contest as

soon as we begin, stumbling at the starting line because our feet are tied together with wickedness. Our promises mean nothing. It is fortunate for us that we are not judged by our broken promises, because that is all we have. Broken promises. To God and to each other.

As Isaiah recorded, **“Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”** (v.5-6) And this is why the color for this season is violet, like it is for Lent. Because this is a penitential season in which we examine ourselves according to God’s holy Law. We know the Christ came down from heaven, but that is only the “what” of Advent, the place where most people stop. That is the best the unbelieving world can do: They grudgingly acknowledge that Jesus was born, but beyond that, so what? That is why they have replaced the season of Advent with the season of shopping and empty sentimentality. But the “why” of Advent should be obvious: It is our sin. Our dark as night, soiled as a bloody rag sins. Even our righteous deeds, which seem to us to be good, which we try in vain to hold up as worthy of something, even these are tainted by our selfishness and idolatry before God. Our plain lack of reverence.

That lack of reverence is not the fault of the unbelieving world. Of course they don’t revere God; most of them don’t even acknowledge His existence. They worship gods of their own creation, gods of material things and gods of their own imaginations. Gods that, for the most part, look and sound exactly like themselves. No, the lack of reverence is found among us, just as it was found among the Israelites. A lack of reverence among those who have God’s Word, who know all that He has done throughout history, and still cannot be bothered to worship Him. To obey Him. To humble ourselves before Him. Isaiah recorded, **“There is no one who calls upon Your name, who rouses himself to take hold of You”** (v.7).

But this season is not about us doing things for God. That would be a short and depressing season. It is about God doing things for us. Thirty-five hundred years ago, two thousand years ago, or even ninety-one years ago. You see, ninety-one years ago, God fulfilled a promise, and then He fulfilled another one on Friday night. Ninety-one years ago He washed away the sins of our sister Lois Umnus when she was Baptized into His Name. He fulfilled yet another promise Friday night when Lois fell asleep in Christ and she was given the crown of glory and now awaits the day of the resurrection. A future promise, tied to Advent, because it will come with our Lord’s Second Coming, His coming at the end of the age in glory. I visited her only hours before she died and despite being deaf, she knew why I was there. To bring Her Jesus. To carry His mercy to her.

Two thousand years ago, God did the unthinkable, the unbelievable, the incomprehensible. He didn’t just send a message to mankind, as He had before. He didn’t just come visit mankind, as He did on Mount Sinai. He took the

extraordinary step of leaving His heavenly abode and He tore into the universe that He Himself created, as Isaiah wrote with a plaintive cry, **“Oh that You would rend the heavens and come down”** (v.1). He did rend the heavens, punching a hole between heaven and earth and coming down to take up flesh for our sake. He came to bridge that uncrossable gap forever. He humbled Himself by taking our form and He lived as we never could: Worshiping His Father as we should, serving others as we are supposed to, the perfect example of humble service that God wanted from us from the beginning.

When God says that He will do something, He does. He does not forget, He does not grow bored, He does not get distracted. God’s promises are sure. Just like His promise to ride into Jerusalem on a donkey, to tear down the Temple and rebuilt it in three days. All of this He can do and did do for us. Let us use this Advent season to both remember God’s promises fulfilled, and the promises yet to come. Let us remind ourselves that we have a God who is not far from us, who comes here where His saints gather in His Name, to give Himself to us. So that we may be cleansed, forgiven and renewed.

In Jesus’s holy name, amen.

Rev. Schopp