

Ad Te Levavi, The First Sunday of Advent, A²D 2010

Matthew 21:1-9

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

1 Happy new year. The Church begins her year not when the pagans begin theirs; she begins with the first Sunday in Advent. And she puts things in a deliberate order. Before celebration, there is anticipation and waiting. Before the manger, there is the cross and the passion. Before Christmas trees, there are palm branches. Before there are angels singing in the heavens, there are crowds lining the road into Jerusalem. Before Christmas, there is Advent. Advent and the beginning of another Church Year announce—not that Christmas is coming—but that Christ is coming. With the start of a new year, we are one year farther away from Bethlehem and one year closer to the Day of Christ's return, the Parousia.

2 Advent is a season of hope. Hope is impossible to come by in a secularized rush to Christmas. Thanksgiving ends and shopping begins. What hope is there in that? Hope that you will score a really great deal on something you only might otherwise have bought? So what? Hope that you will nab the perfect gift that will make you the most beloved gift-giver in your family? So what? Hope that you will have a happy holiday season? So what? If those are the only things for which you hope, woe to you.

3 The mindless commercialism of the culture is designed to distract you from these harsh realities: sin and death, hell and the devil. If you can just buy the right gift, just get the perfect deal, just plan the right meal, just host the perfect party, just improve tomorrow over today, then you can ignore the more pressing problems around you. But Advent takes these problems head on. What's your biggest problem? You're dying. And you don't have to examine very critically to know this is true. Your body gets weaker each year. The presents you gave and received last year no longer satisfy. The parties you threw last year are no longer remembered. The world is breaking down. Sickness, suffering, unemployment, depression, sadness, and chaos are all the results of sin in the world. And they all herald death. What can you do to stop the gradual creep of death? The world around you is hopeless.

4 Advent gives you something altogether better for which to hope. Hope rides a donkey. After three weeks of hearing of Jesus coming to judge, coming to separate elect from damned, sheep from goats, wise and faithful from foolish and faithless, the first Sunday in Advent gives you sure and certain hope. After three weeks of Jesus as Judge, Jesus riding a white horse, here is Jesus riding a donkey. He comes in today's Gospel reading riding humbly on a donkey, not to make war against sinners but to save them. He will fight in weakness, but will win. In Him, you have hope beyond the futility of a commercialized Christmas. In the Jesus who comes processing into Jerusalem on a donkey, you have a certain hope, not a milquetoast wish. "This King shall be called sin's strangler and death's devourer, who extirpates sin and knocks death's teeth out; He disembowels the devil and rescues those who believe on Him from sin and death" (Luther).

5 Look up, beloved of God, Daughter of Zion! Open your eyes and awaken. The night is far spent; the Day is at hand. Your salvation is closer to you now than when you first believed. So repent. Turn away from excuses and sins. Behold, your King comes to you lowly and riding on a donkey. At the beginning of a new Church Year, the message of Jesus as the only source of hope rings clear. He comes riding into Jerusalem on a donkey to deal with your most pressing problems: sin and death. He comes as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. He comes to carry those sins to the cross and to pay for them with His life. The only source of hope in a world of death is the One who died on the cross and who rose victorious. The only certain hope in a life of uncertainty is in the Word of Him who died, who rose, and who will return. The world passes away, but His Word endures forever.

6 If you want hope, you need Jesus. If you want Jesus, find Him where He has promised to be for you: in His Word and Sacraments. Sure, words, water, bread and wine might seem like humble ways for the King of kings and Lord of lords, Jesus the Christ, the Savior from sin and death to be found. But riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, riding in lowly pomp to die on a cross is good news for you. If He can ride on a donkey and hang on a cross, if He can speak through Balaam's donkey, Christ can speak through the mouths of donkey preachers He still sends today, as He promised. If He can choose a donkey as the means to transport Him to His throne the cross, Jesus can choose donkey means like bread and wine to be the means through which He gives His real flesh and blood to you for the forgiveness of your sins. If the Eternal Word of God can choose the womb of a humble virgin girl to be His dwelling place for nine months, if He can choose to be born ordinarily, with human flesh like yours, then He can use plain water in a donkey way to give you an extraordinary rebirth, as He promised in Holy Baptism.

7 Let the world rush; you have hope. Let the world rush to Christmas; you have Advent. Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord, no longer riding on a donkey, but riding on bread and wine, the very Son of God, in the flesh for you. Blessed is he who receives Jesus today in His Word and Sacraments. Blessed is he whose hope is in the Lord. Blessed will he be when the Lord returns to gather His elect.

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

Soli Deo Gloria

Pastor Jeff Hemmer