

Ad te Levavi, The First Sunday in Advent, A ✕ D 2008

Matthew 21:1-9 Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Beth-phage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to me. ³ If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." ⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, ⁵ "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'" ⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ And the crowds that went before him and that followed him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

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

1 Happy new Year. The Lord's Church generally does things backwards from how the world does them, and the beginning of the year is no different. While the world is winding down its year, the Church is beginning her new year. When the world celebrates a new year, the Church celebrates the circumcision of her Lord. And while the world has been celebrating Christmas since the Halloween decorations came down, the Church will not begin her celebration of Christmas until the evening before December 25. And when the world packs away the Christmas decorations on December 26, the Church knows that the season of Christmas lasts until the Feast of the Epiphany of our Lord on January 6. The Church Year begins with Advent. And for all that Advent is, it's not Christmas.

2 Advent is not a season to get you ready for Christmas. Advent is the season to get you ready for the Return of Christ. And, should the return of Christ not happen in your lifetime, Advent prepares you for death. For all the bickering over whether you should greet the clerk in the store with "Merry Christmas" or "Happy holidays," it's simply not appropriate to wish someone a Merry Christmas during Advent. You wouldn't wish someone a happy thanksgiving at the end of October, even if you would wish then a happy new Year at the end of November. And even though the impoverished little drummer boy has a way of making people empty their wallets to buy more presents when he's piped over store stereos, you won't sing any Christmas hymns here until December 24th. Yes, Advent celebrates the first advent of Christ, His Nativity, His Incarnation. But the Nativity is not good news. That Jesus took on human flesh and was born in a manger is not good news. That Jesus was a cute little baby is not good news. That Mary and Joseph were joined by rejoicing shepherds and a chorus of angels is not good news. Not until you know that the cute baby was born to be the Crucified Savior is there good news in the Nativity of Jesus.

3 And so the first Sunday of Advent is indeed backwards. You might expect readings that talk about the Angel Gabriel's visit to the blessed Virgin. But she bore the Lord in her womb for nine months, so we had those readings on March 25. You might expect readings about John the Baptist preparing the way for the coming Messiah, but the Nativity of John the Baptist was on June 24. And while there will be time for rehearsing and rehearing those things later during Advent, the Gospel reading for *Ad te Levavi* is the one you expect to hear on Palm Sunday. Advent begins by confessing that the One whose Nativity we will celebrate in four weeks was born to die.

4 The world has little stomach for such a message during this season. A season of repentance in preparation for the Return of Jesus doesn't bode well for a festive, gift-buying feeling. Holiday sales would slump more from genuine repentance than from a genuine recession. But that's the way of the Church, doing things backwards, because it's the way of her Lord, doing things backwards. So repent of celebrating Christmas prematurely. Repent of hastening to the manger and not to the cross. Repent of making Advent nothing more than a countdown until you're out of days to get your Christmas shopping done.

5 The Lord does things backwards from how you might expect Him to do them. Instead of a superhero's entrance, He entered His creation through the womb of a Virgin. Instead of a warrior's procession, He rode into Jerusalem humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden. Instead of a champion's victory lap, He was lead out of Jerusalem bound to the cross on which He would die. Instead of the glory of His divinity, He took the shame of a sinner's death, of your death. And that's what seems most backwards. It is backwards for God to die in the place of sinners. It is backwards for a Creator to give His life for His creation. It is backwards that Jesus received the full fury of God's wrath on the cross so that you might receive the full measure of His mercy.

6 Jesus came once as a Baby born to die. And He will come again as a righteous Judge to separate the saved from the damned. His second coming would be a terrifying proposition if not for His first coming. When Jesus comes as Judge, it will only be after He Himself endured the fierce judgment of God. He will judge all mankind, not on the merits of their works, but on the merits of His works. If you rely on His works, the Judge will declare you righteous, and you will dwell in His gracious, loving presence eternally. If you rely on your own works, the Judge will have no choice but to declare you wicked, whereupon you will spend eternity separated from his gracious presence.

7 Advent is a season of hopeful anticipation, not of dread and anxiety. You need not fear the Lord's Second coming because you receive His continual coming. There's a third Advent of the Lord. Between Christ's Nativity and His Return, He comes to you. He comes where His Word is proclaimed and His sacraments administered.

8 You do not need to fear the coming of Jesus because God has already come to you in the waters of Holy Baptism. He placed His seal upon you, the sign of the cross on your forehead and on your heart, and He placed His name upon you, His Holy Triune name. You do not need to fear the coming of Jesus because He already comes to you through the proclamation of His Word. He gives you the gift of repentance through the proclamation of His Law. And He delivers the gift of forgiveness through the declaration of His Gospel. You do not need to fear the coming of Jesus because He already comes through the Office of the Keys. He has sent ministers to use His Keys to unshackle you from

your sins. He wants you to have comfort and hope in His coming, so much so, that He sent ministers to speak the comforting word of Holy Absolution to you.

9 And you need not fear the Return of the One who rode into Jerusalem as king upon a donkey. When He returns, having exchanged His donkey for a white stallion, He will graciously claim you as His own. How can you be sure? Because He comes still today. Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. He who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey now rides into this congregation on His word of promise. When He says, "This is my body," it is. The same body on a donkey headed to a cross He places in your mouth. When He says, "This is my blood," it is. The same blood shed to forgive your sins is poured into your mouth to give you that very forgiveness of sins. The Advent of Jesus is every Lord's Day, in every Divine Service. Blessed Advent. Happy new Year.

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

Soli Deo Gloria

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