

HERE COMES YOUR KING

Matthew 21:1-11

First Sunday in Advent (Series A)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 21, verses 1 through 11. This gospel lesson reveals both the identity of Jesus, and the manner of his coming. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 21, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, 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,
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!” ¹⁰ And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” ¹¹ And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

This might seem like an odd text for the First Sunday in Advent. We hear John's version of it on Palm Sunday, one week before Easter. And, chronologically, it fits best there, because it occurs exactly one week before Jesus' resurrection. But we also read about it on the First Sunday in Advent, because it fits well here, too.

It fits well in Advent because it's a fulfillment of Zechariah 9:9, which is kind of the theme verse of Advent:

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Behold, your king is coming to you;
righteous and having salvation is he,
humble and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

Rejoice! Your King comes to you. He is humble. He is righteous. He brings salvation.

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“Advent” is a fancy Latin word that means “coming.”

And it really captures the essence of our faith. Christianity is not another attempt to reach up to God or to pull him down. It’s not an attempt to figure him out with our reason. It’s not an attempt to ascend up to him or to earn his favor through our moral performance. And it’s not an attempt to experience him through some kind of mystical experience. The essence of the Christian faith is that our God comes down to us. He has revealed his will in his Word. And he has especially revealed himself in the person of his Son, Jesus Christ. This is Advent, and this is the one true Christian faith: our God comes to us.

And there are three advents of Christ that we consider during this season. The easiest way to remember them is as past, present, and future.

The first of these is Christ’s First Coming. This is his past advent. We call it “Christmas.” So Advent isn’t just pre-Christmas. It actually incorporates Christmas, but it also covers more. The theme of Christmas is one-third of the theme of Advent. And this text is especially helpful in helping us understand Christmas, because it reminds us what the purpose of Christmas was. Jesus was born to die. The entire trajectory of his life was moving toward a cross on a hill just outside Jerusalem. This is Jesus’ past advent.

The second advent we consider is the present coming of Jesus to us through his Word and Sacraments. This one sometimes gets overlooked, because we often refer to his future coming in glory on the Last Day as his “Second Coming.” But there’s actually another coming of Christ in between what we usually refer to as his First and Second Comings. Or maybe it gets overlooked because it’s not fleshly, like the past and future advents of Christ. It takes faith to see this one. But Jesus comes to us now. He comes through means. That is, it’s not direct. We don’t see him physically, we don’t hear his audible voice, and we don’t touch his scarred skin. He comes through other means, namely, his Word and Sacraments. He comes to us through the reading and preaching of Scripture. He comes to us in Baptism. And he comes to us in the forms of bread and wine at this altar. This is Jesus’ present advent.

And the third advent is his future coming in glory on the Last Day, when the whole world will see him, he will raise the dead, he will judge all mankind, the wicked will be cast into the lake of fire, and he will bring his believing saints into the new creation.

The last couple weeks, we talked about the last days, or what we sometimes call the “end times.” That’s how every church year ends and rolls into Advent. There’s a little more I want to say about it, because I couldn’t quite fit it in, and I struggled to find the right way to say it.

I find it uncomfortable, perhaps you experience the same thing, that God will cast people into the lake of fire, or what we commonly refer to as “hell.” And to say this is “uncomfortable,” might be an understatement. We generally do not want people to be cast into hell. But you know who else doesn’t want people to be cast into hell? God! And he desires this even more than we do. There might be a handful of people who, throughout history, have been so terrible that we kind of want them to go to hell. You can probably think of a few. Or there might be persons you know personally, who have done you such great harm, that you want them to go to hell. But God does not desire for any of these people to go to hell. So we should recognize that when we are uncomfortable with the idea of people going to hell, that is a good thing. We should be uncomfortable with it. We are reflecting, imperfectly, part of the image of God. We get this desire from him.

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But there's a tension in our desires between love and justice. We don't want people to go to hell, so we kind of don't want Jesus to return yet. But, on the other hand, there is so much violence and injustice in the world, that we do want him to return, and soon, so that he can put an end to it. The problem is that our sinful natures are the reason for all the injustice in the world. We do evil things to other people, and they do evil things to us. That's injustice. So we want it to end, and we don't want it to end, because that would mean the end of repentance. Our consciences rightly teach us both of these things. So we have this tension in our desires. And both of these seemingly contradictory desires are in line with the will of God. God's will is that injustice would end. It is also his will that all people should be saved and come to repentance (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

So if we do not desire for the world to end right now, we are, apparently, in agreement with God, because, if it were God's will for the world to end right now, it would. And all these moments of our lives when we have wanted God to wait, we have been in agreement with God.

So we might struggle to see how these two godly desires will come into line. And the reason we don't understand it, is because we haven't gotten there yet. But someday we will. And God is the master of reconciling justice and love. He did it at the cross, where he manifested justice in the most loving way by condemning all sin in the flesh of his Son Jesus Christ. That is, God inflicted justice on God as an act of love toward us. And when Jesus returns on the Last Day to raise the dead, judge all mankind, cast the wicked into the lake of fire, and bring his believing saints into his new creation, it will be an act of both justice and love.

And the Jesus who will come again on the Last Day is the same Jesus who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey and who died for us on the cross. He has revealed to us what kind of God he is, and he will not change. So his return on the Last Day is our blessed hope. We can look forward to it and pray for it to come, because it will come in God's timing, and it will be good.

So these are the three advents of Christ, which we observe during the season of Advent: his first coming at Christmas, his present coming to us through his Word and Sacraments, and his final coming on the Last Day.

Today we especially consider what Jesus' donkey ride teaches us about the manner in which he comes to us.

The so-called "Triumphal Entry" is one of the more well-known events of Jesus' ministry. All four gospels include it. That indicates its significance. But it's really a very curious event. When we stop and think about it, we can't help but say that it's just kind of weird.

There's a prophetic choreography to it. What I mean is, the whole thing is scripted, but that just makes it all the more curious, because, why would anyone script it this way?

Jesus is approaching Jerusalem with a crowd. The Passover is coming up. Now Jesus was becoming quite famous in Israel at this time, and many people were expecting something big from him at the Passover this year.

As he approaches Jerusalem, he sends two of his disciples to fetch a donkey and her colt. Jesus' instructions are prophetic. He tells them exactly what they will find in the village in front of them. He tells them to untie this donkey and her colt, without asking permission. And he tells them what to say if anyone questions them: **"The Lord needs them"** (21:3). Mark and Luke tell us that everything happened just as Jesus said it would, including the detail that people questioned the disciples, but let them go when they told them what Jesus said (Mark 11:4-6; Luke 19:32-34). We see from this that Jesus had choreographed the whole thing. He knew what he was doing.

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And this took place to fulfill what God had spoken through the prophet Zechariah. That's the verse we read earlier about our king coming to us "humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey." Here we see that Jesus didn't just choreograph this the night before, but at least five-hundred years earlier.

And that makes this all the more curious. If God had planned this out, at least five-hundred years in advance, why did he plan it out this way? It's not like Jesus just grabbed whatever animal was most convenient at the time, and that animal happened to be a donkey colt. He specifically chose this animal centuries earlier.

But this is kind of a silly animal to be riding. Your homework tonight is to do an image search for "donkey colt." I've told you to do this before, so maybe you've already looked this up. But if you haven't, you really need type "donkey colt" into your web browser and look at the pictures that come up. Some of the pictures will be of regular size donkeys. And there might be a few artistic representations of Jesus riding a donkey. Those images are probably inaccurate, because they usually picture Jesus riding a bigger donkey. But notice the pictures you find of actual colts. That is, young donkeys. I can already tell you what your reaction will be. You'll think, *It's a miracle he didn't break the poor thing!* There's a reason no one had ever sat on this donkey. It wasn't big enough. But this is how God wanted to ride into Jerusalem, proclaiming himself to be King.

And make no mistake about it; this is a clear declaration from Jesus that he is the King of Israel. He knew what he was doing. He knew the prophecy of Zechariah. Riding into Jerusalem on a donkey's colt is a clear declaration that says, "I am the King of Israel, who was promised long ago."

And the crowds recognized this too. That's why they shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest" (21:9).

"Hosanna" is an Aramaic word that means, "Save us!" They remembered that Zechariah prophesied their king would come with salvation, so they cried, "Hosanna!" That is, "Save us!"

And they understood that Jesus is the promised Son of David. He is the king they were waiting for. Here he is, at last, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey, just as the prophet foretold. This Passover would mean real freedom. This was exciting, even if it looked a little weird.

So this whole thing was prophetically choreographed to reveal Jesus as the King of Israel. But it does more than that. It also reveals his nature, and it hints at the crux of his mission. He comes humbly, and he comes to be humiliated. This is how he saves.

Every time I read about this, and I know I've told about this, probably several times, I can't help but think of the cartoon movie *Aladdin*. There's this scene where he rides through the city streets on this enormous elephant while the crowds cheer. It's a spectacle of pomp and circumstance. That's the way for royalty to enter a city. Or in other ancient cultures, kings would ride into their cities on majestic war horses. The mode of transportation should communicate the glory and power of the royal individual, all the more when this is the king of heaven and earth. An elephant or a majestic horse would seem more appropriate for Jesus.

So there's a stark contrast here. All the nations of the world would laugh at this. Jesus rode a donkey colt. But it's not because that's all he could find. The colt's mother was there too, but Jesus didn't choose her. Or Jesus could have created a horse or an elephant out of dust. But this donkey colt was the chosen animal to reveal the manner in which our God and King comes to us. He comes in humility.

Let's consider what that means. What does it mean to be humble?

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We sometimes confuse true humility with fake humility. Fake humility is when you just pretend to be humble, because you know that no one appreciates arrogance. So you give an “Aww, shucks” kind of reply to any compliment, and you make sure that you say enough negative comments about yourself. That’s not really humility. That’s just self-deprecation.

True humility doesn’t really pay a lot of attention to oneself. True humility looks to the needs of others. So true humility always manifests itself in service of other people. Humility means that you consider others as more important than yourself (Phil. 2:3). It means that you take the form of a servant (Phil. 2:7).

This is what Christ did. He never ran himself down. Jesus was better than everyone else—he is God, after all—and he wasn’t afraid to say so. But he considered others as more important. He considered your needs as more important than his own. He took the form of a servant. He became your servant. He used his superiority to serve. Consider that during this season of Advent.

As we consider the three advents of Christ, remember that in all three of them, Jesus comes to serve you.

In his first advent, the eternal Son of God took the form of a humble infant. He humbled himself to our level. He began where we all begin: in the womb of his mother. He was born. He grew. He learned. He suffered. He went through everything we have to go through. And he was like us in every respect, but without sin. He did all this to serve us. He did all of this to fulfill the Law on our behalf, so that he might go to the cross and serve us in his death. This was the ultimate act of service.

In his present advent, he still comes to serve. He comes through the reading and preaching of his Word. He comes through the waters of Baptism. And he comes in the forms of bread and wine. Again, he does this to serve. He does this to bring the gifts of salvation, which he accomplished in his death and resurrection, and to deliver them to us personally. He still comes to serve.

Even in his future advent on the Last Day, he will come to serve. Though he will come with power and great glory, he does not do this for his own sake, but for yours and mine. He comes to free us, once and for all, from sin, death, and the power of the devil. He comes to raise our bodies from the grave and transform us into his perfect image, so that we might live and reign with him and the Father and the Holy Spirit forever and ever.

Think about this, and marvel at this: everything the King of heaven and earth does is for you. He lives eternally to serve. That’s what it means that he is humble. Your King comes to you, and he comes to serve. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.