

Today we begin the Season of Advent. During this four-week preparation, you and I will prepare for Christmas, not according to the way the world, but according to the way of God and His Church. Speaking of which, the season of Advent has a long history in the Church, some of which I would like to explore with you this morning. Advent, which in Latin means “Before the coming”, lives up to its name. It is designed for us to experience the various ways God in Christ comes to us, His people. Regarding its history, the season of Advent seems to have been established in the fifth century, but there is some evidence that it existed much earlier, possibly as early as the second century. Advent was originally intended to be a festive season, focusing on the joy associated with Christ dwelling with His people, and there was really no difference between the Advent season and that of the Christmas season; the focus of both being the joy of the True Light coming into the World. But over time, the theological emphasis shifted away from Christ’s nativity in Bethlehem and toward an anticipation of Christ’s coming again in glory to judge all the earth on the Last Day. Preparation, not celebration, became the central theme. The season of Advent adopted a more penitential nature and quality; as such, it began to bear a closer resemblance to its sister season of Lent. This is where it stands today for both Advent and Lent are steeped in a deep meditative and somber tone. For the levity of Christ’s birth must always be understood in light of the gravity of our sinful predicament. Christ is our Savior, yes, but He is also our Judge and King. Perhaps it’s not a coincidence then that the season of Advent runs parallel with the season of winter. For both seasons remind us that this world we occupy is currently in the winter of its lifespan. Time is almost at an end. Christ has prolonged time for our benefit. He has stretched time to its farthest possible limits for our sakes, but this period of clemency cannot last forever. There is a time for mercy, but there is also a time for judgment. And when that time comes, Christ our King will come again to judge both the living and the dead. In expectation of this, we drape our altar and pulpit with the color of blue to signify Christ’s royal return.

While the season of Advent is meant to be a time of reflection upon Christ’s regal judgment, there is an undercurrent of anticipation that moves just beneath the surface. This anticipation will continue to build over the next four weeks, and it will finally surface and spill over on Christmas Eve as we celebrate Christ’s birth with rapturous joy. But we mustn’t be impatient. We need to pace ourselves so as not to arrive too early at Bethlehem. I know this is hard to do, and the secular world doesn’t make it any easier, either. Christmas comes earlier and

earlier every year. We who live *in* this world must strive not to be *of* the world. Christmas isn't here. There is a reason for the season of Advent and to gloss over it renders our actual Christmas celebration a bit hollow and meaningless. Advent is all about waiting. But Christmas is worth the wait. And while we wait, we should be active, we should be engaged in thoughtful retrospection. So, I beg you to slow down and take in the season. We will get to the beautiful Christmas story of St. Luke, but today let's consider his equally beautiful account of Christ's entry into Jerusalem. As I am sure you noticed, this morning's reading is the same text we read on Palm Sunday. It serves the same purpose here on the First Sunday in Advent as it does for the first day of Holy Week—it is meant to alter our perception of things. The text draws our attention to how Christ's coming as our King will never match our own wishes and desires. For it is not by sight we measure His kingship, but only by faith. Only by faith do we judge the nature of Christ's coming correctly; not by taking stock in what we see or feel, but only in what we hear. For this reason, Christ was received as a King only by those who accepted His word as truth; that is, only by those who judged and received His kingdom not by sight but by the Spirit. We, who are born of that same Spirit see His eternal kingdom coming in just this way.

Our take away for this first Sunday in Advent is the very difficult lesson that we can't create our own truth about God. The crowds wanted Christ's glory, without His suffering. Even His own disciples expected a different kind of Messiah. But we who walk by faith and not by sight know that you can't have God on such terms. In order to have the joy you must pass through the sadness. Before you can understand Christ's birth, you must first understand His death, and before the preaching of the Christ-Child, comes the preaching of Christ and Him crucified. All of this seems a bit backward, I admit. It seems as if we are the ones who are guilty of getting ahead of ourselves; perhaps not by rushing to the stable of Christmas, but by rushing instead to the cross and grave of Easter. But this is the Divine order of things. This is how God turns the world upside down. The Advent season teaches us that we live not beginning to end, but end to beginning. Death to life. Grave to cradle. Last things first and first things last, and Christ at the center, who is and ever shall be the first and the last, the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. Amen.

In Christ,

Rev. Jeremy H. Mills