

Ad Te Levavi  
3 December, Anno Domini 2023  
St. Matthew 21:1-9

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

Saints of God,

Christmas, like most holidays, has become more of a habit than a celebration – we put up decorations, we sing our favorite hymns and carols, we gather together with friends and family, we drive to church on Christmas Eve to hold our little candles and sing “Silent Night.” All these things seem to bring us comfort more because it's what we've always done, rather than the truth of what lies behind them.

Christmas is almost more about nostalgia than it is about serious contemplation of the fact that the eternal Son of God, the Second person of the Holy Trinity, joined Himself to our sinful flesh in order to redeem us and give us hope in the midst of this dark and dying world. The very thing that we are trying to conjure up through memories of good times, is exactly what our Lord would bestow upon us in reality.

But it seems there is something else very important that is ignored or at least taken for granted. Jesus came! God Himself came down from heaven and was born of the Virgin Mary. That simple fact, that the Lord of all creation, the perfect and holy God, would so humble Himself as to take on human flesh, defies all logic and explanation. St. Paul was right to call it a mystery.

Now that might not be such a big deal if we were all perfect. We would have nothing to hide, nothing to be ashamed of. It would be the Garden of Eden all over again walking with God in the cool of the day. Many theologians have wondered if the Son of God would have taken on flesh whether we fell into sin and needed saving or not. It's an interesting question that is fun to think about, but not one that has any real consequence because the reality is that we **did** fall into sin and we **do** need salvation. Our hearts are full of distrust, anger, doubt, and selfishness. We speak thoughtless and cruel words. We revel in the downfalls of our enemies. We fill God's ears with shallow excuses why we treat the gifts of life and salvation as less important than our jobs, our families, our sports, and our laziness. We try to quietly withdraw ourselves from those who are suffering, struggling, and weak. The world is filled with wickedness and hatred and death and everywhere we turn fills us with anxiousness and fear so that we doubt the good and gracious promises of our heavenly Father.

So suddenly the idea of God coming down to be with us is really a terrifying prospect. Shame doesn't even begin to describe the absolute horror of standing before God completely exposed like Adam and Eve. There aren't enough leaves in the forest to cover up all of our sin and guilt before God. It's always safer to think of God somewhere far away, much like we would rather break up with somebody over an e-mail or call someone with bad news, rather than have to confront them face-to-face. Suddenly, with the prospect of standing before God, all of our best efforts and our trying and our good works lose their shine. We actually have to see them for what they really are, filthy rags tainted by our selfishness, our doubt, and our greed.

Repent. Jesus has come. He has come to once again walk among us. And when we receive Him in faith, when commend ourselves, our bodies and souls, and all things into His keeping, we don't have to tremble and hide in shame. Jesus didn't come to condemn us as we deserve. Jesus didn't come to shake his finger at us and hold all of our sin against us. And that's really what throws us off about the true God. He just doesn't do the things that we think He should do or act in a way that we think He should act. He's not the God that we imagine Him to be. That's why we find it strange that he's riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. That's why the Pharisees just could not get over the fact that Jesus ate with prostitutes and tax collectors and all the dregs of society. If we were alive at the time, we probably would have had the exact same reactions the Pharisees. God should only want to be around good people. But we think that because we think we're good. We live under the delusion that we have somehow stepped above sin and conquered temptation, that they can no longer threaten or harm us. Or perhaps we don't. Maybe you are afraid of God, terrified because you very acutely feel your unworthiness. Maybe you can't imagine that Jesus would want to have anything to do with you...or worse. But Jesus comes for sinners.

That's why he came. That is the miracle of Christmas – not only that Jesus came, but that He came to have mercy. God came to be with us so that he could save us, so that he could save you and me. Blessed is he, blessed is he, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Blessed is He who has stirred up the great power of His love and approaches us in the wreckage of our lives – in our loneliness, our despair, our sickness, our arrogance, our guilt and our shame. Blessed is He who bore in His divine humility the burden of all our sin so that we don't have to be terrified of God's judgment against us. Because of that little baby born to the lowly Virgin Mary, we can now rejoice that God comes to his people, that he is not a God who stands far away from us and leaves us to die in the filth of our own mess.

The incomprehensible depth of His love drove Him to come to live among us, to walk among us, to be one of us, and to die for us.

But to what end? What now? This season of Advent and indeed our every day is not about preparing for Jesus to be born. That, of course, already happened. What we are always preparing for is for Jesus to come again. We are to be filled with eager anticipation, not for presents, or Christmas trees, or traditions, but for the trumpet to sound and our Lord to come on the clouds of heaven in glory to rescue us from this veil of tears. We must prepare, constantly, so that we are not caught unawares, so that we are not asleep in sin and in unbelief when He appears. He must prepare us. By the very same Means through which He called us to faith, He also preserves us in the faith. In His Word, in Baptism, in Absolution, in Holy Communion, the Lord Jesus Himself comes to us to forgive and strengthen us in His Word and the true Christian faith until we die. Before our Lord comes in glory, He comes in grace and humility to be with us. His coming is not just a future event. It is an event that occurs every time His Word is proclaimed and the Holy Sacraments are administered according to His institution.

And if, as He promises, every time we gather around His gifts He promises to be here in our midst, should we not also prepare ourselves to receive Him in our ears and mouths? Consider the lengths we will go to over the next few weeks to receive family and friends into our homes in such a way that they are honored guests worthy of all our efforts - hours of cleaning, getting down the nice dishes, extra expense on good food, even down to wearing nicer clothes and giving special attention to our appearance. Why? Because we love and respect those who are visiting us and we will do all that we can to demonstrate that in both word and deed.

But do we make such heroic efforts to prepare to receive Christ, our King and Savior, who draws near in Word and in meal? Not only the high honor due to Christ for His office but also, and perhaps even more so, for the fact that He stands among us sinners to save us, to teach us, and to feed us demands the utmost from us for whom He does all these things. It is quite easy for the things of Christ to become mundane to us and little more than habit. It is easy to simply let Sunday morning rush by with little thought as a nice habit and the gifts of Christ to be lost on us, to be of no benefit to them. They don't work by magic. Simply being in their presence and checking off the box like brushing your teeth in the morning, doesn't benefit you. Such an approach turns the works and gifts of Christ into our own works for which we think we should and will be rewarded. And that way of thinking is always lurking at our door, as God warned Cain it would.

That is why it is important that we set aside the time to prepare ourselves to receive Christ with true living faith. And preparation requires discipline. It requires ceremony. It requires us to put the old flesh to death through contrition and repentance. It requires reading and meditating on God's Word and praying that God would grant His Holy Spirit to fan into a raging inferno the faith which was bestowed upon us in Holy Baptism so that there is nothing more precious or necessary for us than the Word of Christ, so that we would be willing to sacrifice everything, even our very lives rather than despise or turn aside from His gifts.

Advent is a wonderful season which the Christ's Church observes in order to help us practice the Christian art of preparation. During such penitential seasons, the Church has very purposefully placed before us opportunities and teaching to help us practice and get in the habit of preparing ourselves to receive Christ. One of the ways is by adding another opportunity on Wednesday evenings to gather together to hear the public reading and preaching of God's Word and to call upon Him in prayer. Set aside that time. Say no to other things to prepare, to be prepared by Christ. We take up the Litany which draws into sharp focus our need for salvation and God's great mercy in all things.

The Church also draws special attention to the practice of fasting. Not, of course, to be seen by men or rewarded by God, but because our flesh needs to be disciplined. We need to deny our flesh its desires because they are of sin. It is a time to set aside indulging in food and alcohol, in entertainment that is not edifying, in busy schedules that keep us from regular prayer and family devotions. I encourage each of you to make up your mind to fast from something this Advent. Practice denying your flesh the things of the world and filling your hearts, your minds, and your schedules with more of the things of Christ. I can promise you with absolute certainty, you will find it to be a rich blessing to you and you might even find yourself at the end of this season continuing your fast because you find that you really didn't need those things after all and that in their place the Lord has blessed you with greater peace and good.

We also take time to emphasize alms giving both to the Church and to the poor. We know how tempting it is to cherish our wealth and our goods. Our flesh loves these things. And that is exactly why it is good for us to increase our sacrificial giving so that our faith may be tested and strengthened and our hearts drawn away from the things of the world. These things are not our good. They do not save or even help us. That honor belongs alone to God our Father. Test Him and see if He will not do exactly as He promises to those who love and trust in Him.

Daughter of Zion, behold your King. He has come to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and of the colt the foal of a beast of burden to defeat sin and death. He comes to you in the flesh today, humble mounted on a bit of bread and a drink of wine to conquer the weakness and doubt that remain. He comes to reassure you that His love is for you, whatever your sin may be, however you are tortured by it, however impossibly dark and vile it seems. And He will come again in the flesh, but no longer humble. When He comes again He will come in all His glory and majesty to judge both the living and the dead. He won't be riding on a beast of burden, but on the clouds of heaven surrounded by legions of angels. But you have nothing to fear because the blood of Jesus has made you clean and your trust is alone in Him. Prepare yourselves to receive Him. Afford the highest honor and glory to Him who once humbled Himself to the point of death on a cross to serve you, to save you, to redeem you from death and deliver you from eternal judgment. Lay your cloaks and palm branches before Him. Call upon Him in every trouble. Receive the gifts He gives to you with humility and eagerness for in these gifts He gives you Himself, He comes to you this day and rides in triumph into your ears and mouths.

Then, when Jesus comes again on the last day all of God's people, all who have thus been prepared, all those who call upon him, who, with lamps full of the oil of hope, have looked forward for His return, who humbly confess their sins, and rejoice in the God who was slain, YOU, will raise your victory shouts of Hosanna and march triumphantly behind your Lord into the gates of eternal life where you will bask forever in the presence of the God who comes. Blessed is He who has come this day to save us!

Hosanna! Hosanna! Hosanna in the highest!

In the name of +Jesus.

Pastor Ulmer

(We stand.) The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.