

“WHO IS THIS?”
Pastor Arthur Litke
First Sunday in Advent
November 27, 2022
Zion Lutheran Church
Fort Wayne, Indiana

TEXT:

When [Jesus] entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” And the crowds said, “This is the Prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”
Matthew 21:10, 11 (ESV)

Just in case you’re wondering, we haven’t lost track of what time of the year it is. It may at first strike you as odd that the Gospel for this First Sunday in Advent, from which I chose this morning’s sermon text, is a passage from Matthew’s account of the Palm Sunday story of Jesus entering the holy city and being hailed as King--the Son of David. In the traditional one-year lectionary this narrative served as the Gospel reading for both Palm Sunday and the First Sunday in Advent. That was changed in the three-year lectionary, but the editors of our current hymnal have wisely restored this reading for this particular Sunday. It makes perfect sense when you stop to think about it. On both of these Sundays the people of God begin to celebrate the coming of the King who brings redemption to His people, delivering them from slavery and bathing in light those who dwell in darkness. As the crowds gathered in the streets of Jerusalem to sing the praises of the One who came into the city for the purpose of accomplishing their salvation through His death, so we gather to sing His praises as we anticipate Him returning for the consummation of all that He has done for us.

In Advent we actually celebrate the threefold coming of the King of kings--His coming in the past, in the present, and in the future. We remember, first of all, that He came to earth some twenty centuries ago, being born as the human Child of a humble virgin named Mary in a humble village called Bethlehem. We give thanks also that He comes to us right here and now through His Holy Spirit in the means of grace that He has appointed: the Word of God and the Sacraments. And, finally, we anticipate with joy the fact that He will come again at the end of time to make good on all of His glorious promises as He delivers us from every evil of body and soul and takes us to Himself to live forever in the joy and peace of heaven. As we prepare to celebrate the joy of Christmas and the even greater joy of the second coming of our Lord, the question asked and the answer given by the crowds on that first Palm Sunday are still very relevant for us today.

The people who asked: “Who is this?” on the first Palm Sunday could just as easily have asked that question in our time and place during the last couple of months of every calendar year. We have all this excitement going on around us, but so many are confused as to who this excitement is all about. Is it a bearded jolly old elf in red suit with flying reindeer? Is it the merchants who depend on the holiday season to break even and turn a profit by the end of the year? Is it the people who are unusually generous at Christmastime, or is it perhaps the beneficiaries of their generosity? Any or all of these people could be what it’s all about as far as the world is concerned, but nobody can say for sure who the Source of all of this excitement is--and nobody seems to care about it all that much either. Least of all does anyone seem to be concerned about this Baby born in Bethlehem. Oh, I suppose that the Baby part and the poverty are okay. They inject a nice sentimentality into the season, but worldly-minded people don’t want to hear anything about a virgin giving birth and a Child who was born to suffer and die. That’s getting a little too specific--and a little too graphic.

But there is more than just confusion that makes it difficult to determine who this holiday season is about. There is also the matter of “political correctness.” We laugh about it all the time, but the sad truth is that it’s very difficult to hear and speak the Christian message in the world that we live in today: a world where you can’t say that anything is wrong without being considered intolerant--a world where you dare not say or even suggest that there could possibly be such a thing as absolute truth. The world that we live in has no room for a Prophet who claims to be God and who finds His greatest glory in a humiliating death and then on top of it all has the audacity to say: “I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

All of this makes it all the more important that we, the people of God in Jesus Christ, give a clear and definite answer to the question: “Who is this?” The Jerusalem crowd on that first Palm Sunday had no difficulty in giving such an answer, and neither should we. It is Jesus Christ and no one or nothing else. All of this joy--all of this celebration that we see and experience during these last couple of months of the year is about Him. And if it’s not, then it’s only a sham--an empty lie. No matter what the commercials or the news reports may say, this season is not about material gifts or a boost for the economy or feelings of warmth and generosity. It’s not about feeling a little more religious than we do the rest of the year and it’s not about being nice to people who we really don’t particularly care for.

Even more important than any of that, it’s not merely about a sweet and sentimental legend that tells us about a Baby being born in a stable in poverty. What it’s about is the God who became Man--Jesus Christ--and the salvation that

He brings to lost sinners like us. There is no gift that really matters other than the reconciliation between God and sinners brought about by the life and death of Jesus Christ, who offered Himself as the perfect Sacrifice for human sin. There is no real “peace on earth [and] goodwill toward men” (Luke 2:14 KJV) that does not flow from the blood-stained cross of the One who was born in Bethlehem. There is no genuine “Spirit of Christmas” except the joy and generosity that come as a result of the Son of God who took on human flesh and blood to suffer and die at the hands of humans for the sake of humans. He and He alone is what this season is all about.

Advent is a time to prepare, but not the kind of preparing that the world is preoccupied with at this time of the year. December 25 will come and go as it does every year. We will prepare for it as best we can, but if past history is any indicator, precious few of us will be completely prepared in time. But that doesn't really matter. The preparation that we really need to make is far more serious than any of that. The King of Glory who came so long ago to redeem us is coming again to consummate our redemption. This second coming of Christ is a sure thing that no one can predict. How do we prepare for it? He Himself prepares us by coming to us here and now in His means of grace as we are in the Word of God, where His Holy Spirit convicts us of sin and warns us of judgment in the Law and comforts us with the Good News of forgiveness and salvation in the Gospel and as we live the baptismal life and receive the Savior's body and blood in His Supper. This preparation, accomplished in us by God Himself, will make it possible for us to welcome the Lord of Glory, whenever He may come, not with trepidation and terror, but with eagerness and joy. Amen.

May the One who once came as an Infant in Bethlehem prepare you for His coming again in glory by His Means of Grace, through which He comes to you even now. May He equip you to be His witnesses so that you, like the Baptist in the wilderness, may prepare the way of the Lord. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it. Amen.