

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

There's a new color on the altar signaling a new season in the Church. The blue signals that it is Advent; Advent signals the start of a new Church year and with it, the coming of Christmas.

It is curious that Advent begins with a consideration of Jesus' entrance into Jerusalem as a humble king, riding on a donkey's colt. Why does this account figure so prominently at the start of Advent? And it does, whether one uses the historic one-year lectionary or the more fulsome readings of the three-year lectionary, as we do.

These all attest: Jesus' humble entry and our agitated welcome have long been a part of the Church's Advent preparations. Our Advent hymns too reflect this focus. But why? I don't know, and consulting some books on the origins of the liturgical year left me unsatisfied. Permit me to offer a bit of my own speculation in this regard, beginning with the aphorism: "Well begun is half done."

This little saying from Aristotle is surely true, and it applies to the church year. Beginning the church year with Jesus' Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem begins the year well. It puts us on the right path for the whole year — our atonement in Christ. You well know that Jesus entered Jerusalem in order to offer Himself up as the perfect sacrifice for sin. He came as "[t]he stone that the builders rejected" that He might "become the cornerstone" upon which His church would be built (Ps. 118:22; Eph. 2:20).

For it is not Christmas that is the focus of the church year and its message; it is Good Friday and Easter. "[W]e preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). In fact, Paul says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). Jesus' incarnation and birth are an important part of our salvation story, to be sure, but they are just the beginning of that story, not the ending. The cross is the climax; "It is finished" (John 19:30) is the resolution to our problem of sin. Jesus came that He might die, that He might give His life as a ransom for many, that He might rise again in triumph. And so, as we make our way toward Christmas, we remember Jesus' humble yet triumphal entry into Jerusalem and let it light our path throughout the church year.

Second, a theme of Advent is "coming" — Dr. Scaer would be disappointed if I didn't remind you that that's what Advent means. But the coming of whom? Surely there are various "coming" themes in Advent: the coming of the forerunner, the coming of the angel, the coming of Immanuel, and what we heard today: the coming of the King. "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord," fulfilling Zechariah's prophecy: "Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he ..." (Zech. 9:9).

The people's praise of "the coming one," the king, comes from Psalm 118, along with their shouts of "*Hosanna!*" Such words often greeted the coming of the king as he made his way to the temple to worship God. But Jesus was more than a conquering King, more than just the Messiah, come to deliver Israel from Roman rule. He was "*Christ, the Lord*" (Luke 2:11), the angel declared at His birth. And that proclamation caused the heavens to open up in thunderous praise, not just to Christ, but to God: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace ...*" (Luke 2:14).

Similarly we hear today at Jesus' triumphal entry — the adoring crowds declared Him to be "*the King who comes in the name of the Lord,*" and, whether they fully understood it or not, they gave Jesus divine praise much like the angelic choir had: "*Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!*" Art Just wrote of this convergence: "Thus *earth and heaven* are joined together in peace through the incarnation and atonement of Christ ..." (Just, *Concordia Commentary, Luke 9:51–24:53*, p. 747).

The Pharisees understood what the crowd had proclaimed — Jesus' coming establishes peace as only God can do — and the Pharisees objected: "*rebuke your disciples.*" But creation will not be silenced at this marvel. We will not be silent, but we will "[l]ift up [our] heads" in praise as David exhorts us, "*that the King of glory may come in.*" "*Who is this King of glory?*" Like the crowd did, we recognize Him. He is "[t]he LORD, strong and mighty"; He is "*the LORD, mighty in battle*"; He is "[t]he LORD of hosts"; that's who "*the King of glory*" is (Ps. 24:8, 10)! He is a righteous branch of David, a king, but He is "*the LORD is our righteousness.*"

Third, another theme of Advent is being "stirred up." The Advent collects bring out this theme: "Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come ...," we prayed; and in coming weeks: "Stir up our hearts, O Lord ..." and "Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us ..." (Collects for Advent 1, 2, 4).

In fact, at Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, "*the whole city was stirred up*" (Matt. 21:10); and so as we hear this account again, we are meant to be stirred up to make ready for Jesus' coming: as the babe of Bethlehem, Christ the Lord, as the Lamb of God who takes away our sin, and as the humble king who comes in the name of the Lord. Jesus came in all of these ways, and He promises to come again as the Lord and Judge of all.

But Jesus comes even now to us, still in lowly means, still to stir us up in faith and devotion to Him, as He did to Noelle today. Jesus entered into her heart today, riding not on a donkey's colt, but on the water that poured over her, washing away her sins, giving her the Spirit who is working faith in her even now that will give

her the hope of eternal life. Advent is a reminder to all of the baptized of this truth that stirs us up to pray “Enter now my waiting heart, Glorious King and Lord most holy. Dwell in me and ne’er depart, Though I am but poor and lowly. Ah, what riches will be mine When Thou art my guest divine (LSB350:2).

Ah, what riches indeed, for Jesus does not serve meager fare when it comes to His grace, but is generous to overflowing. Appearances make it seem otherwise, for Baptism appears as plain water, and the Supper appears as nothing more than bread and wine. But Baptism delivers the promises of salvation. And, in the Supper, Jesus rides in again in such humility to serve us His body and His blood, the same body and blood that triumphed over all His enemies, and by this eating and drinking, we are stirred up again — all year long, but especially in Advent — stirred up in faith in Christ and in love and good works. So in this season, whether it’s food given to the seminary food co-op, goodies for shut-ins, contributions to the Lutheran Social Services’ Cup of Kindness, or some other worthy cause, may the Lord stir us up by His coming to go forth in love.

So, are any of these the reasons why those who developed the lectionaries chose to have the Palm Sunday Gospel lead us into Advent and the new church year? I don’t know, and I haven’t seen an answer. But we can certainly use this wonderful Gospel text to set us on the right path of preaching Christ the crucified and preserving us in this proclamation. We can use Jesus’ coming as King to be reminded that He is no ordinary king, but the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And we can use this Holy week text to stir us up in our devotion to the Lord Jesus in faith, in faithfulness to His daily and weekly coming in Word and Sacrament, and in love and service to others.

We are well begun again with this account of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem. May the Lord who has begun this “*good work in [us] ...bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*” (Phil 1:6).

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