

Rev. Dan Welch Midweek in Advent 1 12-4-24 Text- Luke 19: 28-40

Have you ever felt like you're in the wrong place at the wrong time? or like you know where you are but can't figure out how you got there? That's how it kind of seems this evening. Everything is out of whack. It's Advent, the time of preparation for Christmas. We expect to be transported to Bethlehem, to a manger surrounded by animals and shepherds. Instead, our Gospel takes us to Jerusalem with Jesus riding on a donkey.

The Sanctuary and the Fellowship Center are so beautifully decorated for Christmas. Christmas lights have popped up on houses all over town. Christmas parties are coming. I, for one, have been listening to Christmas music for almost two weeks now.

Strangely enough, though, the assigned Gospel reading for the First week in Advent in the three year lectionary is the same as that of Palm Sunday—Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It seems wrong, in a way. Out of place. Yes, Advent also points us to Jesus' second coming at the end of time, but we know Advent's also about preparing our hearts for the coming of the Christ **Child**. Children have begun rehearsing for Christmas services, getting ready to reenact the story of Mary, with child, riding on a donkey into Bethlehem. Instead, we're saddled with a story about grown-up Jesus riding on a donkey into Jerusalem. In Advent, we should be moving toward a celebration of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and instead we hear a story about our Jesus moving toward His death in Jerusalem. We should all be going to the theater to see the latest Christmas movie, and instead we're treated to what looks like the prequel to Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ".

But maybe there **is** something we can learn—something that, like Mary, we can take with **us** and ponder in **our** hearts. Jesus riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. It's really for **this** reason our Lord came from heaven. It's really for **this** reason the Son of God became the Son of Mary. The story that we hear this evening is the story that gives Christmas its meaning and its lasting value.
(pause)

But for many, Christmas seems to be a holiday about nothing. Or else, only about the things of this world. In our society, Christmas has become a largely secular, worldly affair. 'Put up some bright, flashy lights to make the long nights of winter seem not so long. 'Give presents as a thoughtful tradition and to see what you can get in return.' Sure, we celebrate Christmas, and we even fight for the right to say "Merry Christmas" out in public, but how often do we talk about **why** Christmas is merry? It's all about Christ! The absence of Christ from Christmas has left a big hole for many; an emptiness that needs to be

filled. And so, lots of people try to fill the void with manmade traditions, songs, and stories. Rather than tell the story of Christ, the world tells countless other stories like How the Grinch Stole Christmas, It's a Wonderful Life, The Night Before Christmas, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snowman, and The Santa Clause Movie, parts 1,2, and 3. The world has its own hymnal as well, with Christmas hymns ranging from Elvis's "Blue Christmas" to Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." Nat King Cole sings about chestnuts roasting on an open fire (Who does *that* anymore, anyway?) and Gene Autry can be heard singing of the advent of Santa, coming right down Santa Claus Lane. I like a lot of those stories. I enjoy many of the songs. But if that's *all* there is, we don't have much to celebrate.

And what *did* the Bethlehem angels mean by the way when they sang, "Peace on earth"? For two thousand years, we've had nothing but wars and rumors of wars. Again and again in the Bible, the angels said, "Don't be afraid." But we live in what seems to be an age of fear. Lots of people have anxieties of one kind or another. Some fret over climate change; others worry about the high crime rate throughout our country, some have grave concerns about open borders, still others are not certain about the economy. Then there's the ongoing wars in the Middle East & Ukraine. Peace on earth? Some days it feels more like "doom is inevitable."

And so, at Christmas, when peace on earth seems unattainable on a national or global scale, we try it on a smaller scale, at home with family and friends. Many people, even Christians, will say that Christmas at its heart is about friends and family. And this side of heaven, the family is about the best gift there is. But families, too, can be turned into idols. In fact, many Christians don't even go to church on Christmas, Christmas Eve or even during Advent because they want to be with their families.

And even at home, there isn't always peace. Christmas is great, but the bills aren't so wonderful. Throw in worries about work, struggles at school, ailing parents, a chronic medical condition, a family argument, the loss of a loved one, a broken relationship; and there's a lot of strife and sadness. Some of this sadness is because we live in a fallen world, but truth be told, some of this sadness is of our own making; bad choices we've made, people we've hurt, relationships we've damaged.

Where, then, can we find peace? Nowhere else than in Christ; the Child who was born to die. A real-world Savior for a world with real problems. The baby of Bethlehem who would set His sights on Jerusalem. The One whose birth was lit by a star and whose death would be met with darkness.

And so, at our Lord's birth, the angels sang, "Peace on earth, goodwill toward men." But there is still another song to sing, and we sing it as Jesus is riding on a donkey into Jerusalem: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Lk 19:38). Peace in heaven? What does that mean? There's always peace in heaven. Heaven is where we escape the evils of this world. Well, there's more to it. Peace in heaven isn't just a description; it's good news. There's peace in heaven because God is at peace with us.

We have to wonder, "How *could* God be at peace with us? How could He be at peace with a world that is constantly at war? How could He be at peace with a world that disregards Him, ignores Him, and takes His blessings for granted? How could He be at peace with a world that has taken the celebration of the birth of His Son and turned it into just another time to eat, drink, and be merry? How could He be at peace with me, a sinner?"

If we're ever to recover Christmas, I think we first have to recover Advent. Advent is a season of preparation—not simply of our homes, meals, and presents, but a time of preparation for our hearts. A time of assessment and acknowledgment and a time to recognize why our Lord came in the first place. A time to recognize why that infant Child, born to be King, would one day receive a crown of thorns. A time for repentance.

Look at your life and turn away from sin again. Think about your life, your hopes, your dreams. What are you looking forward to? What are you planning for? Is your heart set on just the things of this world? on new cars and new homes? on toys and vacations? Are setting your sights only on the things of this world? Or are you thinking of the life to come?

The season of Advent is a time to assess; a time to remember that the things of this world are already passing away. Advent is a time to set our hearts, again, on things above; a time to look at the Child who came to die, a time to put to death our sinful passions.

And so, we sing, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord." And we recognize that He comes to die for our sins. We remember that we've been baptized into the name of the Lord & so we renounce, *again*, the devil, all his works, and all his ways. We don't simply cry out against the evils of this world, but we repent of the evils of *our own* heart.

Yes, Advent is a time for repentance, a time of sadness over sin. But it's also a time of hope. We have hope because we have a Savior. In Christ, there is a new beginning. Christ has come to make things right. And He will come again to bring us to eternal life in heaven.

For the world, Christmas is a big game of pretend—of creating an ideal world that doesn't exist, talking about a peace that doesn't exist. But for us, Christmas is life itself. So, in this season of Advent, ***let's prepare our hearts*** again for our Lord's coming. Let's cast away the works of darkness and fill our lives with every good work and with acts of charity and generosity. Let's forgive as we've been forgiven. And let's embrace the One who came to embrace and save us. Amen!