



Pastor Caleb's Sermon

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT—DECEMBER 13, 2020
JOHN 1:6–8, 19–28

In the Name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Advent is the season of the church year that most clearly defines the Christian life.

Advent is the season of the church year, that most clearly defines the life of each and every Christian. Easter, with its joy and brightness and celebration, its fifty perfect days of victory, doesn't accurately describe any of us. Our lives are not yet one constant victory over the temptations of the world. We do not yet see fully the reality of Christ's resurrection in our lives. It has begun in us, but it is not all that we see in ourselves. In Lent we are directed to take a good long look at our own sinfulness. We reckon with our sins so that we might be able to more rightly enjoy and celebrate Christ's death and resurrection, when he was crucified for our sins and raised to new life for our justification. But if the whole of the Christian life were like Lent, we would never look away from our sins to see the One who actually forgives us our sins. If our lives were one long Lent, it would itself be a tacit denial of our baptisms, of Christ's resurrection beginning to take effect in our lives. Lent and Easter have very different faces, yet they are always looking at each other, working together.

Advent puts these two faces together at the same time. Advent joins what seems to be separated out in Lent and Easter. This is how Advent is the season of the liturgical church year that defines and interprets the Christian life, and every one of our own lives in Christ.

Today is a special Sunday in Advent, which is why on the Advent wreath we light the rose candle. It goes by the name *Gaudete* Sunday. *Gaudete* is a Latin word, it simply means "rejoice." This was the first word in our Epistle lesson: "Rejoice always," *Gaudete* always. This is one face of Advent: Rejoice! As one of Advent's best hymns puts it, which will be sung at the end of this service:

*Rejoice, rejoice, believers, and let your lights appear. ...
The Bridegroom is arising, and soon is drawing nigh.*

We rejoice because, as Saint Paul put it, our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. Christ the Bridegroom draws nigh. When Lynnae and I first became Lutheran, and first started trying to follow the rhythms and seasons of the Christian year, I thought that Advent was about preparing for Christmas. I thought we were supposed to pretend as if we forgot that there was going to be a savior born in Bethlehem, and that he would be the very Son of God in the flesh. But for those of you who grew up Lutheran, you know that that's not the case. Advent is when we are preparing for Christ to come *again*. We are waiting for Christ to return to reign as King. It is fitting that Advent is just before Christmas, because as surely as he has come, he will come again. We rejoice, we *Gaudete*, because there is nothing more certain in all the world than that Christ is coming again, and coming to reign. He has promised it. His word is sure. Once he came in humility, he comes soon in power and glory and majesty. And this will be a magnificent scene, unlike anything the world has ever known. We heard as the Entrance Hymn how the best of all Advent hymns imagines the scene:

*Lo! He comes with clouds descending, Once for favored sinners slain;
Thousand thousand saints attending, Swell the triumph of his train:*

*And what is it that they are singing?
Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia! Christ the Lord returns to reign.*

This is why we rejoice. Christ will come on the clouds, with angels and archangels, with saints singing out in perfect chorus: Christ has come to reign over all. Alleluia, rejoice! This is the first face of Advent: the face filled with joy at

the coming of the King, the one that is filled with the radiance and splendor of the King of Glory himself. Christ the Lord returns to reign!

But Advent has another face. This other face is something closer to the face of John the Baptist, that wild man who lived in the desert, clothed in camel's hair, eating nothing but honey and locusts. All throughout Scripture, locusts are a sign of God's judgment, and this wild-eyed prophet eats a steady diet of it. John the Baptist bursts into our Sundays and proclaims the coming Kingdom, but his message is not one of joy.

In Luke's gospel, he tells of a crowd coming out to be baptized by John. John welcomes them with these words: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. ... Even now, the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." It almost sounds as if John the Baptizer didn't want them to escape the coming wrath. There is no happy choir singing "Come, Just as You Are" to these people as they are coming down to the River Jordan to be baptized. "You brood of vipers," John the Baptist says, "who warned you to flee from the wrath that is to come?" (3:7 NRSV) That is the message of every Advent, and yet it never seems to make it onto any Advent calendar.

This is Advent's second face, set before us every year in the wild-eyed prophet crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, wrath is coming. A little later John the Baptist says: "Christ's winnowing fork is in his hand." He will clear the threshing floor, he will "gather his wheat into his granary. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:17 NRSV). Surely this is a sermon that will level the mountains and raise up every valley. In our Gospel lesson, priests and Levites come to John to ask him if he is the long-awaited Messiah. The people were all talking about it, wondering if he were. You can't help but wonder if they were not a little relieved that John was *not* the Messiah. What type of kingdom would John bring if he *were* the Messiah? Would it be one that anyone would be permitted to live in any way? Would everyone have to eat locusts?

And yet the season of Advent doesn't let us escape this wild voice crying from the wilderness. Advent has two Sundays set apart for John the Baptist and his message of wrath and repentance. He knows something about the Messiah that the world, and the church, desperately needs to hear and to know. We need to hear of the wrath of God. We need to hear the message of repentance. We need someone to tell us about the darkness of the world, and about the darkness that is yet in us. Advent doesn't permit us to shy away from the darkness in the world, nor does it permit us to imagine that we have no darkness left in us.

If we dispense with the wrath of God, if we whistle past the grave, we do no one any good, and we do much harm. If we think that the message of the wrath of God is not also for us, then we reject the message of God's greatest prophet. Jesus himself said about John: he is a prophet, and more than a prophet. "Among those born of women," Jesus says, "no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist" (Matthew 11:9, 11 NRSV). So the priests and the Levites who come to John asking if he were the Messiah, if they were relieved when they found out that he wasn't, their relief was unfounded. For what he said was true. He did point his finger at the one to come. He was right about the coming wrath of God.

This is the other face of Advent: the face of the wrath of God. I said earlier that Charles Wesley's "Lo! He comes with clouds descending" is the best Advent hymn ever written. I said that because it so perfectly places these two faces next to each other: the face of joy and alleluia, and the face of wrath. "Alleluia, Christ the Lord returns to reign," the first verse concludes. But the second verse takes a sudden and drastic turn:

*Ev'ry eye shall now behold him,
Robed in glorious majesty;
Those who set at nought and sold him,
Pierced and nailed him to the tree,
Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing,
Shall their true Messiah see.*

You can almost miss the words because the tune is so lovely, and because just a moment before it spoke of alleluia. But the words should stop us in our tracks. Three times it repeats, those who see the King shall wail deeply. We don't often sing hymns about deep wailing. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, this is not. When the hymn speaks about those who set at nought and sold Christ, it is not only speaking about Judas who took the thirty pieces of silver; when it speaks about those who pierced and nailed him to the tree, it is not only speaking about the Roman soldiers who held

the hammers and pounded in the nails. It was you and I that sold him unto death, just as Joseph's brothers all conspired together to sell Joseph into slavery. It was you and I that considered him as nothing, as worthless, as a thing to be ashamed of, disregarded, despised. We nailed him to the tree. It was our sin that brought Christ down from heaven. If Christ died for your sins, then those nails were yours. It was our sins that held Christ to the cross. In the hymn, when every eye beholds Christ, when they see their true Messiah, he comes with alleluias resounding. But then they see that he is the one that they are all responsible for killing. This is God in the flesh, and they killed him. He comes to them as the Crucified One, but this means that he is the one that *they* crucified. "Deeply wailing," they see their true Messiah. We go from alleluia to deeply wailing in but a moment.

But, thanks be to God, the hymn doesn't end there. For in the next instant after they see that the King is the one that they killed, they see that he bears these scars willingly, that he endured death out of love, not out of wrath. The hymn continues:

*Those dear tokens of his passion,
Still his dazzling body bears,
Cause of endless exultation,
To his ransomed worshippers.
With what rapture, with what rapture, with what rapture,
Gaze we on those glorious scars!*

In seeing his scars, those glorious scars, tokens of his passion, we see that though we sold him, though we nailed him to the tree, he turned our sins into the source of our salvation by bearing it in his own body. From alleluia to wailing to rapture through Christ's work of death and resurrection.

The two faces of Advent are held together in Jesus Christ. John was not wrong about the wrath of God coming, he was not wrong about the separating of the wheat and the chaff. But perhaps he couldn't see that God's wrath would be borne by the Son of God himself on the cross. For the wrath of God is not opposed to his love. God's love does not need to overcome his wrath, or something like that. For the wrath of God simply is the love of God when it encounters someone that is not able to receive his love. Remember what Jesus says in the Garden of Gethsemane, he drinks the cup of the wrath of God. The wrath of God he drank to the very dregs so that his wrath can be experienced as his love by all those who pierced and nailed him to the tree.

But that doesn't mean that the face of wrath simply disappears. Because of Christ's death, because he ever bears the tokens of his passion, the scars of his crucifixion, the face of wrath for all of eternity will never disappear. But it will always be the face of the one who was killed *for us*, who died for us because of his love for us. This is the King for whom we wait. And so we can hear anew the words of Isaiah the prophet as the words of the coming King:

¹ The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn;

the day of vengeance and the year of the Lord's favor come as one, they come at the same time. But it shall be the Crucified One that announces both. And so we can rejoice always, we can *gaudete* always, as our Epistle lesson says, for the "one who calls us is faithful" (1 Thess 5:24, RSV). He is coming, and he comes for you, for your salvation. Lift up your heads, that the King of glory may enter in. Lift up your heads, your salvation is nearer to you now than when you first believed. Even so, come, Lord Jesus. Amen.