

The First Sunday in Advent

St. Matthew 21:1-9: "He Is Near You Who Can Cheer You."

December 2/3, 2017 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank You, we bless and praise You forever, that You sent Your Son to rule over us poor sinners, who for our transgressions justly deserved to remain in the bondage of sin and Satan, and that in Him You gave us a meek and righteous King, who by His death became our Savior from sin and eternal death. We beseech You so to enlighten, govern and direct us by Your Holy Spirit, that we may ever remain faithful to this righteous King and Savior, and not, after the manner of the world, be offended by His humble form and despised Word, but, firmly believing in Him, obtain eternal salvation; through the same, Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (ELH, p. 147)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the twenty-first chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. We read selected verses in Jesus' name:

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied, and a colt with her. Untie them and bring them to Me. If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once." / This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying, "Say to the Daughter of Zion, 'Behold, your King is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'" / The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and He sat on them. Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. And the crowds that went before Him and that followed Him were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!" (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Jn. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, who still comes humbly in the name of the Lord, dear fellow redeemed:

"It's the most wonderful time of the year!" Have you heard that song on the radio yet? It is so lively and cheerful. It's the kind of song that gets stuck in your head—whether you like it or not. And what is it that makes this the most wonderful time? According to the song, it's kids jingle belling, parties for hosting, caroling out in the snow, and having loved ones near. Those are all good things, but those things alone cannot guarantee happiness.

For many, this season is not the most wonderful but is the most difficult time of the year. They feel the crunch of preparing for Christmas parties at work and at home. They feel the financial strain of trying to get the perfect gift for everyone. Some feel a deep sadness due to the recent death of someone close to them. Others feel the emptiness of dreams and plans unfulfilled

through the passing years. They wonder how everyone else can manage to be so happy when they are so discouraged and down.

It was for you who are struggling that Paul Gerhardt wrote this hymn stanza: “Rejoice, then, ye sad-hearted, / Who sit in deepest gloom, / Who mourn o’er joys departed, / And tremble at your doom; / Despair not, He is near you, / Yea, standing at the door, / Who best can help and cheer you, / And bid you weep no more” (ELH #94, v. 6). You can rejoice even in the difficult times of life, because **He Is Near You Who Can Cheer You.**

I

Who is it that is “near you”? It is Jesus. Jesus is God, and God is everywhere. So in that sense, He is near everyone. But that is not what we are talking about here. The Son of God “was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary” (Nicene Creed) to be our *Immanuel*—God with us. He came to meet us in the depths of our sin, our despair, our grief, and our trouble. He did not shy away from sickness and disease, from physical, mental, and spiritual distress. He came.

He came humbly, and many despised Him for it. They did not like how He associated with the social outcasts and sinners. If He was the Christ of God, shouldn’t He be in the company of those who tried the hardest to keep God’s holy law? Wouldn’t He praise their efforts and usher them into closer communion with God? But instead, they were criticized and even cursed by Him. Jesus openly told the people to “*practice and observe whatever [the scribes and Pharisees] tell you—but not what they do*” (Mt. 23:3). He called them hypocrites! That was not the sort of Messiah they were expecting.

But aside from the religious elite, the common people were enthralled by Jesus. His powers were so far above them, yet none were below His concern. And He did not employ those powers for selfish gain or fame. He used them to help people and serve them. He could heal with a touch or just with a Word. Shortly before riding through the gates of Jerusalem on a donkey, Jesus had even called the dead man Lazarus out of his tomb. This is what brought the crowd out to meet Him and to cover the road ahead of Him with palm branches and cloaks (Jn. 12:18). Who could this be but the Messiah, the promised Savior from the family of David? “*Hosanna to the Son of David!*” they shouted, “*Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!*”

They believed that He had come to be their king, but they did not understand this in the right way. They hoped for a king who would liberate them from the Romans. They wanted a king who would restore earthly glory to the people of Israel and cause them to be respected around the world. But this is not why the Son of God came. God became Man to save. He came to shoulder the burden of the law that was impossible for us all to carry and to let His body be pierced and His blood shed to atone for all sin.

The true King hides His power in humility and His strength in weakness. This is not the sort of king that many people are looking for. If you ask them what their greatest needs are, they will probably talk about needing more time, more money, and help with relationships. The first thing on their minds is not the forgiveness of sins, righteousness from God, and the certainty of eternal life. What they especially want God to give them is good health, success at work, a comfortable lifestyle, and a feeling of happiness. If they do not receive these things, they

complain and question God. They want a heavenly king who shows His strength and power in the world, so that everyone can see the visible and tangible benefits of following him.

But our Savior's glory is hidden in the cross. He won by losing. He conquered by dying. Natural human thinking cannot comprehend this. The world despises it. But we treasure it. By faith, we see it for what it is. We understand that God became Man for me. He took my place because He loved me. He suffered and died on my behalf. He wants me to be with Him in heaven.

II

This is what He tells you in His Word. But He doesn't just tell in His Word; He gives and grants through His Word. This is how the God who "came near" to the human race by taking on flesh, comes near to you personally. Jesus comes to you through His Word and Sacraments. "*Behold, I am with you always,*" He says, "*to the end of the age*" (Mt. 28:20). He is with you "*where two or three are gathered in [His] name*" (Mt. 18:20). He is with you when water and Word are applied in Baptism (Rom. 6:4). He is with you when bread and wine are blessed and distributed in His Holy Supper. God can get no closer to you than His means of grace.

Many Christians think that their closeness to God depends on what they do. They measure how close they are to God by how close they feel to God. This affects how they approach prayer and worship and Christian living. Their chief consideration is not what God promises them, which is the Gospel. Their focus is on their promises to Him, which rest on the Law. It's no wonder they find comfort in Christ so hard to come by.

If closeness to God depended on you, you know how far off you would be. God's reach is not limited, but yours is. The prophet Isaiah says, "*your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear*" (Is. 59:2). Your sins have caused the great divide between you and Him. You could never, ever bridge that gap.

But Jesus can, and He did. "*[N]ow in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ*" (Eph. 2:13). St. Paul writes that Jesus reconciled you with His Father by His death on the cross. Then he states that the resurrected Christ "*came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near*" (v. 17).

Jesus comes to you with a message of peace. It is not a sentimental peace like you might have all cozied up, watching a fire in the fireplace. It is a real peace, a peace that binds us together with the living God, a peace that comes from having forgiveness and salvation through Christ. This peace that we have with God is the source of our spiritual rejoicing even when we don't feel very cheerful.

Peace with God does not replenish my bank account, but it does bestow spiritual treasures that will never be exhausted. Peace with God does not make all my earthly troubles go away, but it does increase my longing to be where trouble is no more. Peace with God does not bring my loved ones back from the dead, but it does give me hope that their bodies will be raised up, and that we will be united again in heaven.

God does not promise you a carefree life in this world. But He does promise to be present in your grief, your pain, and your struggle. That is the kind of King you have—a King who serves. He wants you to turn your weaknesses and your guilt, your worries, fears, and doubts over to Him. How do you do that? By bowing your head in repentance and giving up on your ability to make and do everything right. And then by satisfying your spiritual hunger and thirst by coming to the Lord's Table and receiving His holy body and blood.

Jesus comes to save you there just as He came to save on Palm Sunday. Why does He come? The hymnwriter tells us: "He comes, He comes with gladness, / Moved by His love alone, / To calm your fear and sadness, / To Him they well are known.... He comes, He comes procuring / The peace of sins forgiv'n, / For all God's sons securing / Their heritage in heav'n" (ELH 94, vv. 7, 8).

Therefore we pray, "O glorious Sun, now come, / Send forth Thy beams so cheering, / And guide us safely home!" (ELH 94, v. 10).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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