

“Between the Times: Looking Back and Looking Forward”

Isaiah 11:1-10

Revelation 21:1-4

Matthew 11:2-6

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Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent is the beginning of the Christian year.

During Advent we anticipate the celebration of Christmas. At Christmas, of course, we remember the birth of Jesus. This is a form of looking back, looking back to a time when we believe something very special happened that we don't want to forget. The birth of Jesus is important to us because Jesus is the Christ. Hence, it's appropriate to look back and to celebrate his birth. But, traditionally, the church has also understood the season of Advent as a time of looking forward to Christ's final coming in glory and victory, when the forces of evil and death will be conquered once and for all and there will be “a new heaven and a new earth,” as the Book of Revelation prophesies (Rev. 21:1). So, then, at Advent, we stand between the times: we look back to the past and we look forward to the future.

The word “advent” means “coming”: it can thus refer either to the first coming of Christ or to the second coming of Christ. In both cases, we are concerned with the meaning of Christ for our lives. “Christ” is a title and it means “messiah.” “Christ” is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “messiah.” The messiah is God's designated representative on earth who is the herald of God's kingdom when there will be no more sin and evil, no more suffering and death. The ancient Jews first started longing for the coming of a messiah after centuries of oppression under foreign rule. They looked back to the glory days of old when they had a great and mighty king like King David. David was a king beloved of God who ruled over all of the twelve tribes

of Israel in a unified kingdom. He was also a brave warrior. You'll remember how he slew the giant Goliath with his slingshot while he was still just a boy. He was also a musician and a poet who composed many of our beautiful Psalms. What the Jews wanted at the time of Jesus was another glorious king like David. They hoped he would overthrow the Romans and thus restore self-rule to Israel. But they also hoped that this new king David would put an end to all injustice and war on earth. Such a king would rule on behalf of God, and there would no longer be any discrepancy between the world of politics and God's will for the world. This world would become the Kingdom of God where peace and justice would reign forever.

Jesus proclaimed the coming of God's Kingdom (Mark 1:15) and taught his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 5:10). Some Jews even hoped that God's representative would bring an end to all suffering whatsoever, including sickness and death. Jesus' own healings and exorcisms were intended as vivid anticipations of this new future, since he healed bodies of diseases that crippled them and cast out demonic forces that held people in thrall. When the disciples of John the Baptist asked Jesus, "Are you the messiah who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (Matt. 11:3), Jesus replied: "Look at the evidence and judge for yourself: 'the blind now see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the poor have good news'" (Matt. 11:4, my paraphrase). When the Book of Revelation looks forward to a new heaven and a new earth, it assures readers that God "will wipe every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more" (Rev. 21:4). So whether it's political and moral evil that we're talking about, such as the Romans represented, or natural evil, such as sickness and death, the Jews longing for a messiah were waiting upon God to act decisively in order to bring about a world in which human beings could flourish without these threats to their well-being: "Thy Kingdom come."

This vision of the ideal ruler is painted by the prophet Isaiah in the passage that was just read for us. Jesse was the father of King David, and so a “shoot from the stump of Jesse” refers to one of his descendants (Isa. 11:1). He is described as having the Spirit of God resting upon him, which means he is full of wisdom and understanding, and he delights in doing God’s will. He judges impartially, which means he doesn’t take bribes; the meek and the poor know that he will decide their case with righteousness and equity. Moreover, under his rule, even nature itself will lose its hostile appearance: the wolf shall lie down with the lamb and the lamb will no longer be afraid; the lion shall eat straw since it will no longer prey upon other animals; children shall play near snakes and not be harmed by them. As the prophet declares: “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9). Such a king is the messiah.

We who are Christians may forget how odd it was for Jesus’ disciples to claim that he was this messiah. Since the messiah was supposed to overthrow the Romans and put an end to all the injustice and evil in the world, Jesus hardly fits the bill. Although he proclaimed the coming of God’s Kingdom, he himself was put to death by the Romans who made a mockery of any claims that he was a king. They placed a crown of thorns on his head; and above the cross they placed a sign explaining that this man is “the King of the Jews” The evil forces that the messiah was supposed to vanquish vanquished him! He not only suffered death as we all do, but he was tortured to death in a deliberate act of cruelty that highlights once again the depravity of human evil. And yet Christians make the odd claim that this person who was mocked, tortured, and executed by the Romans is nonetheless God’s vice-regent, God’s appointed representative on earth, the messiah, the king of kings. How can this be? The apostle Paul reports why the majority of Jews have never accepted our messianic claim on behalf of Jesus. He says that for them this claim is “a stumbling block” (1 Cor. 1:23), that is, it’s offensive. To say that God’s

messiah has been defeated by the forces of evil is shameful. Paul also reports that most of the non-Jews to whom he tried to preach this message thought it was ridiculous: it is “folly,” “foolishness,” they replied (I Cor. 1:23). We Christians preach a message that others think is offensive and foolish. After all, how can God be at work conquering sin, evil, and death through someone who was himself the victim of sin, evil, and death? We need to be reminded of how odd and surprising our message about Jesus is and to give account to those who ask how Jesus can be our king if he has no kingdom?

I remember as a child looking forward to Christmas. My mother always bought one of those pretty Advent calendars that allowed you to open a new flap each day so that we could count down the days leading to Christmas. For me, Advent was primarily the season of waiting for Christmas, and back then Christmas was about Santa Claus and expecting to find presents under the tree. Although I also knew that Christmas was Jesus’ birthday, that wasn’t my focus at all. Nor should it have been. I was a child. What did I know then about sin, evil, suffering, and death? Childhood is a time of innocence. Once we lose that innocence, however, Advent and Christmas can take on new meanings having to do primarily with Jesus and no longer with Santa Claus. It was about the time I stopped believing in Santa that I learned how Jesus had died.

When I was 7 or 8 years old my parents took me to see a movie about Jesus called “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” It was a big Hollywood production and I don’t think my parents thought twice about taking their little boy to see a movie about Jesus. But what they didn’t know was that I was about to have the biggest shock of my young life. Not only did I not yet know *how* Jesus had died, but I don’t think it had even occurred to me *that* he had died at all! At any rate, as the hours passed in the darkness of that theatre, the movie eventually came to the part in the story where Jesus’ enemies have him killed. Before then, it had also never occurred to me

that Jesus had had any enemies! After all, wasn't he the best person who had ever lived? My young mind wasn't prepared for what I was about to see on the big screen in vivid technicolor: Jesus was brutally whipped, then his hands and feet were nailed to a cross. I was traumatized, quite literally. I had no idea that such cruelty was possible, and that it could happen to Jesus of all people. I cried so hard that I could barely breathe, and I ran out of the theatre and sat down in the lobby, where I just sobbed. Finally, my father came out, grabbed my hand, and brought me back into the theatre so that I could witness the resurrection of Jesus, but it made no impact on me at all. Nothing could take away the horror and the heartbreak of what I had just witnessed. I cried all the way home and then, in bed that night, I cried myself to sleep. I was never going to be the same person again. I had seen the evil in this world and it broke my heart. The innocence of my childhood was gone. And this devastating experience left me with questions about Jesus I had never thought to ask before.

My experience of watching that movie was very similar to that of the first disciples who experienced Jesus' death at first hand. It caught them completely off guard and it was a trauma for them. It dashed all the hopes they once had that he might possibly be the messiah. As one of these downcast and despairing disciples confessed on the road to Emmaus, "We had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). The clear implication of his confession, however, is: "But we were obviously wrong." We were wrong about Jesus being the messiah, because, by definition, the messiah is the one who is sent by God to defeat the forces of evil, not to be defeated by them. You see, it's easy for those of us in the church to take the death of Jesus for granted because we've become so accustomed to it. But until we are able to imagine the trauma these first disciples must have experienced as a result of Jesus' death, we will never be

able to appreciate just how odd, surprising, and puzzling was their claim that Jesus is nevertheless God's messiah through whom God overcomes the power of sin, evil, and death.

To be sure, this is not the kind of messiah most of us want. We would rather see an unambiguous display of God's power and might. Those of us who have grown weary with humanity's sin and moral depravity would like to see the wicked people in positions of power get what they deserve; we'd like to see the King Herods and the Pontius Pilates of this world taken down once and for all! But, alas, this is not what we expect when we turn on the evening news. Just imagine if we could turn on our televisions tonight and hear Walter Cronkite or Anderson Cooper announce that from now on there will be no more war and hatred to report. So too, those of us who are worn down by the suffering caused by sickness and death would like to hear that both of these have been eradicated once and for all. Imagine Dan Rather or Wolf Blitzer announcing on the evening news that from now on there will be no more sick people, and that death too has become a thing of the past. But, alas, this is not the case, and we know that we'll never hear a news report like this on television.

So, what kind of messiah is Jesus, if he really is the messiah? Well, for one thing, we cannot point to a perfect world and say, "See, this is what our Jesus has done for us!" There are no facts to point to that could prove the truth of what we proclaim. That's why each of us has to make a decision regarding him. The challenge that the Christian message puts before us is whether to see in this person who met such a horrible fate at the hands of sin, evil, and death the redemptive love of God that actually saves the world from sin, evil, and death. Like John the Baptist and his disciples, we have to ask ourselves: "Is Jesus the one we've been hoping for, or should we wait for another?" (Matt. 11:3). Even the miracles that Jesus enumerates are not proof that he is the long-awaited messiah of God. They simply indicate what has been happening to

the people around him who have put their faith in him: “the blind can see, the deaf can hear, the lame can walk, lepers are cleansed, and the poor have good news” (Matt. 11:5). As a result of his ministry, people had their lives transformed. Here and there, goodness triumphed over evil, healing triumphed over disease, joy triumphed over sorrow. But that’s not the end of this story. At the end of this story, Jesus dies when the forces of sin and evil rear their ugly heads again and put a stop to his ministry of liberating the oppressed, healing the sick, and consoling the afflicted. That’s why the story of Jesus is such an ambiguous one. That’s why the question whether he is the messiah is not a matter of objective fact, but a matter of personal decision that each of us has to make for ourselves. That’s why our passage from Matthew’s Gospel concludes with these words from Jesus: “Blessed are those who take no offense at me” (Matt. 11:6). We could have been offended by what he did in his ministry, as were his enemies who sought to kill him, or we can take offense at the foolishness of the claim that he is the messiah in spite of having been defeated by sin, evil, and death. But if we do decide that he is the messiah, what does this mean?

It means that God saves the world in an odd and surprising way, at least in a way that is puzzling and contrary to our usual expectations. God chose to redeem the world by assuming our human condition with all its suffering, sorrow, and sadness. God did not remain aloof, standing on the sidelines, being indifferent to our cares and woes but decided, rather, to enter the fray of human life. The Book of Revelation, when it looks forward to the final coming of Christ in glory, declares: “Behold, the dwelling of God is with human beings. God will dwell with them and God will be with them” (Rev. 21:3). But the Christian message is that God has already dwelt among us, in the person of Jesus (John 1:14). In Matthew’s Christmas story, the angel tells Mary that her child shall be called “Emmanuel, God with us” (Matt. 1:23; cf. Isa. 7:14). Through Jesus, God has given the world a pledge that we are not abandoned since God

knows our human condition, and has suffered it with us. The Book of Revelation also tells us that on that final day God will wipe away every tear from our eyes; but the Gospel of John tells us that “Jesus wept” when his friend Lazarus died (John 11:35). The one in whom God has already been with us cried as we have all cried, felt sorrow as we have felt sorrow. He even feared death as we all fear death: Matthew’s Gospel says Jesus was “sorrowful and troubled” as he faced his impending death (Matt. 26:37) and the Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus prayed “with loud cries and tears” (Heb. 5:7). Moreover, our messiah not only knew the sorrow and fear of death, and had compassion for those who were sick and demon possessed, but he also experienced the consequences of human sin and evil: he was betrayed by a close friend and colleague before being falsely condemned by a kangaroo court, mocked, tortured, and shamefully executed, his bloody naked body on full public display for all to see and jeer at. And this same one whose life ended in disgrace and humiliation began his life in a stable, in a barn with smelly animals, since there was no room for him and his parents at the Holiday Inn.

The Christian message is that the messiah who will come in power and glory has already come in weakness and humility; that the God who will dwell with us has already dwelt with us; that the God who will wipe away all our tears has also shed those tears. The odd and surprising thing about our message is that God decided to save the world by suffering with us out of love: “For God so loved the world...” (John 3:16). That’s why the apostle Paul replies to those who take offense at the message of a suffering messiah and think it is just a bunch of foolish nonsense by saying: “the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength” (1 Cor. 1:25). Martin Luther, the Protestant Reformer, always pointed to the cross and the manger as the unlikely places where we should look to find God in this world. God’s power is hidden in weakness; God’s wisdom is hidden in foolishness. If we

proclaim that this baby born in a stable is the king of Israel, that this disgraced criminal on the cross is truly the messiah of God, then we are making a claim about how God acts in the world to save it: not by destroying God's enemies in a dramatic display of power and might but by suffering with us in love: that's our Emmanuel, God with us.

Of course, like the Jews, we Christians do look forward to the coming of the messiah in power and glory; but unlike them, we also affirm that the messiah has already come once before. And because of this first coming, we now wait for that final coming with assurance, hope, and courage, knowing that we don't have to fear the King Herods and the Pontius Pilates of this world; we don't have to fear the suffering that comes with sickness or live in dread of death. Through Jesus, God has given us a pledge that we are not abandoned: Emmanuel, God with us. Although the objective observer will say to us that our king is without a kingdom since the world is still unredeemed and full of sin, evil, and death, we who have embraced Jesus as God's messiah believe that the world has been transfigured by his coming into the world. We think we already see the light dawning on the horizon that will eventually cast away all darkness when it shines with the brightness of noonday. Jesus is God's pledge of good faith to us that God loves human beings and cares about us so much as to share our human condition with us. And so, at Advent, we realize anew that as Christians we live between the times: looking back to the first coming of the messiah in humility and looking ahead to the final coming of the messiah in glory.

Perhaps some of you, however, enter this season of Advent with mixed feelings. Perhaps there is a twinge of sadness because you remember the joy you once had when there were small children at home who were filled with excitement about Christmas since Santa Claus was soon coming to put gifts under the tree. Perhaps you long for those days because now, by comparison, it's harder to get excited about Christmas; since the kids are grown and no longer at home,

maybe you wonder, “What’s the point?”; or, because with advancing years your physical vigor is diminishing and you have lost your former youthful energy; or, because with retirement you no longer feel as useful and wanted and needed by others as you once did; or, because at this stage of your life you just can’t bear to listen to any more bad news on television each night with its incessant reports of even more human hatred and cruelty than you ever thought possible; or, maybe you’ve grown too weary of life to feel much joy this Advent season and so you doubt whether there’s much of anything left in it for you. But remember what I said: just about the time I stopped believing in Santa Claus was when I learned how Jesus died. The kind of Christmas celebration to which we all look back fondly with nostalgia is only possible because of the innocence of childhood. Whether we recall the joy of Christmas that our parents gave to us when we ourselves were children or we recall the joy of Christmas that we gave as parents to our own children, that kind of joy is about innocent childhood, which lasts but a season. Yet, for the church, Christmas is not about Santa Claus; it’s about Jesus. After Christmas each year Santa returns with his reindeer to the North Pole where he lives with his elves making toys for next year’s visit to the children. Jesus, however, went from the manger at Bethlehem to the cross in Jerusalem. Only adults who have lost the innocence of childhood can truly understand and appreciate the church’s story of Christmas. That’s why the real meaning of Christmas this year is for you, for those of you who are sad, or tired, or worn down, and weary. Only those whose eyes have been opened to the realities of evil and sin, suffering and death can really share the longing for a messiah and a kingdom of God. During this Advent season, all of us here can look forward to something that far outweighs any nostalgia we may have for Christmases past. The greatest gift of this season is the one that all people are deeply yearning to receive, but it cannot be purchased at the shopping mall and it won’t be found under the Christmas tree. That gift is

none other than Emmanuel, God with us: in the past, in the future, and even now, between the times. Amen.

Transition to Celebration of Communion:

Only those who are willing to accept the offence and foolishness of a suffering messiah can understand why, on this first Sunday in Advent as we prepare to celebrate his birth, we now also commemorate his passion. For, as the apostle Paul explains, “as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the messiah’s death until he comes” (1 Cor. 11:26, substituting “the messiah’s” for “the Lord’s”).