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Advent 1 One Year Series 2016

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Advent I One Year Series

The one year series of readings is ancient. We are preparing notes on them this year because these are the readings which Luther used and we will be citing him regularly in these notes, especially on the Epistle and Gospel lessons since the historic one year series did not appoint an Old Testament reading for each Sunday, only an Epistle and Gospel Reading.

While Luther does not address the topic of Advent as a season in his Postil for the season, he does provide an excellent introduction which some sage words on reading and interpreting the Bible.

Luther:

[W]e should know that there is only one Gospel, though written by many apostles. Each Epistle of Paul and Peter, along with Luke's Acts, is a Gospel, even though they do not report all the works and words of Christ, but one has it shorter and less than another. There is not one of the four great Gospels which includes all the words and works of Christ, nor is that necessary. The Gospel is and should be nothing else than a report and history about Christ.

Thus the Gospel should be and is nothing else than a chronicle, history, and reading about who Christ is, what He has done, said, and experienced, which some write short, some long, some this way, some another way. Most briefly, the Gospel is a report that Christ is God's Son who became a human being for us, died, rose again, and was made Lord over all things. St. Paul says as much in his Epistles and emphasizes it, though he omits all the miracles and acts which are described in the four Gospels. Yet he includes enough of the whole, full Gospel, as can be seen clearly and beautifully in the greeting to the Romans, where he tells what the Gospel is and says.

Second, [you can see] that you should not make a Moses out of Christ, as if He did no more than teach and set an example, as the other saints do, as if the Gospel were a doctrinal or law book. Therefore, you should grasp Christ – His Word, works, and suffering – in two ways. First, as an example that should follow and do, as St. Peter says, "Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example" (I Peter 2:21). As you see Him pray, fast, help people, and show love, so you should also do for yourself and for your neighbor. But that the least part of the Gospel, for which it cannot even be "Gospel," for in that way Christ is of no more use to you than any other saint. His life remains which Him and does not help you at all. In short, that way does not make any Christians, but only hypocrites. You must go much higher than that – though now for a long time this has been regarded as the best way, even an extraordinary way, to preach.

The main point and basis of the Gospel is that before you grasp Christ as an example, you first receive and apprehend Him as a gift and present given to you by God to be your own. When you see or hear that He has done something or suffered something, do no doubt that Christ Himself with His doing and suffering is yours. You can rely on Him no less than if you had done it, indeed, as if you were Christ. That is truly apprehending the Gospel, that is the superabundant goodness of God, which no prophet, no apostle, no angel has ever fully expressed, which no heart can ever sufficiently be amazed at and comprehend. That is the great fire of God's love for us by which the heart and conscience become happy, certain, and at peace; that is what preaching Christian faith means. Such preaching is called the Gospel, which means in German as much as a

cheerful, good, comforting message, for which reason the apostles are called the twelve messengers.

When you now have Christ in that way as the basis and chief blessing of your salvation, then the second part follows, namely, that you take Him as an example and devote yourself to serving your neighbor, just as you see that He has devoted Himself to you. Then faith and love are both active, God's commandment is fulfilled, and the person cheerful and fearless to do and suffer anything.

(*Luther's Works*. Vol. 75. CPH, 2013. Pp. 7-9.)

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Three times this Advent season we will utter the ancient plea to God that he “stir up” or “rouse” his power and mercy. It is as if we perceive him to be distant and inactive. It feels that way sometimes when the realities of life get us down. Of course our faith asserts that God needs no bugle call to wake him up, and certainly not my prayers. But we join here the martyrs and persecuted church, we join the emigrants who huddled in a sod hut on the plains of Nebraska, doughty reformers who stood up for their catechism in the 16th century, but also Christian refugees from the Middle East today, and every Christian who has wondered when God is going to show up. That said, I wonder if the better petition today would not be that God wake up but that his people be roused from their slumber. Our pews are comfortable and our fights are about constitutions and bylaws and the administtriva of institutions, but there are people out there who are dying who do not know the love of Jesus while we bicker.

These prayers and the whole season of Advent tend to simplify things for us; it tends to see things in stark contrast, a black and white world. Today we will focus on our weakness and need for God's powerful intervention on our behalf. Of course, when God stirs up this power it will be the end of the world. Do we really realize that we are praying for the end of the world here?

We pray for God's power, always a dangerous thing, so that we may be rescued from the perils of sin and saved by his mighty deliverance. What are the perils of our sins that threaten us so? Is it the mortal death that sin brings? Is it the fact that sin cuts us off from God? Is it the crippling effect of sin upon our lives? Much of my ministry was spent helping people deal with the massive problems which sin brings. What do you think we mean by the peril of sin? How would you articulate that for the folks to whom you preach? What does it mean when you hear those words?

Rescued and saved are easy enough to understand, but I am not sure that our folks really hear those words in their full metaphorical impact. Rescue is what firemen do to us when we are in a burning building. Save is what we call it when a lifeguard dives into the pool and pulls out the drowning victim.

What of our sins has us in that sort of peril? I would guess that the folks who have undergone a natural disaster have a pretty good grasp on what are the perils of our sins. The believers may think this is divine punishment, but the scientific among them are in an even worse predicament. They believe that super hurricanes and typhoons are the product of global warming. We did it to ourselves, our sins of overconsumption, our sins of over industrialization have now killed thousands and promise to do more. We have become both our problem and our judge. To whom will we appeal for mercy?

The preacher's task in this is to make this specific to our generation. Advent focuses our attention on the "not-yet" aspect of Christ and our relationship to him. We are not yet in heaven, and that has real and painful consequence in our lives right now.

Remember this is stuff that will eventually only be dealt with by the presence of God in Christ, both in terms of his first coming and in terms of his second coming. The preacher will do well in preparing for his sermon if he asks himself, "What do we expect the arrival of Christ to rescue us from?" I fear that many of us really just want Jesus to leave us alone, ask little of us. We have for the most part constructed lives which we think are pretty comfortable and unless some tragedy has befallen us, we like to think that we are not really in need of some rescue, perhaps a little cosmetic surgery, a nip and tuck which corrects my vision, pulls off a few pounds I need to shed, etc., but not anything major. But Jesus has come to replace our hearts of stone with living hearts.

Jeremiah 23:5-8

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!" declares the LORD.² Therefore thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who care for my people: "You have scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for your evil deeds, declares the LORD.³ Then I will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply.⁴ I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the LORD.

⁵ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ⁶ In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

⁷ "Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when they shall no longer say, 'As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' ⁸ but 'As the LORD lives who brought up and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' Then they shall dwell in their own land."

(This pericope shows up in series B in Proper 11 – I have included the notes from that Sunday.)

This is one of those days when you can be glad you know Hebrew, or at least that you know someone who knows Hebrew. Jeremiah proclaims a righteous branch, a ruler who will not be like the stinker king he has right now. Jeremiah is obviously not happy with the current administration. They are the shepherds who should be attending to the needs of the flock. Instead, they are scattering the flock, driving them away, not attending to them. The result is that God will attend these shepherds for their evil deeds. There is no ambiguity here. Jeremiah proclaims judgment on those in power.

Through Jeremiah God promises that he will gather the scattered remnant of his people and set over them true and caring shepherds. They will multiply and be fruitful. Then they will not be afraid or dismayed and none shall be missing. The days are coming when a righteous branch to David's withered stump of a dynasty shall sprout up. He shall reign as king and deal wisely and execute justice and righteousness. Judah will be saved, Israel dwell securely. His name shall be...Here is where it is really good to know Hebrew...His name shall be "Zedekiah" or translated "The Lord is our Righteousness."

This is where Jeremiah really gets himself in trouble, for the king of the land at that time was named "Zedekiah." Jeremiah is saying that in that day God will raise up a king who really lives up to his name. This is nasty, this is like one of those political cartoons which pillories a president for his looks. One only has to think of Nixon's bulbous nose or G. W. Bush's ears, or even the current occupant's long legs and close cropped hair. They have all shown up in those political cartoons. This is Jeremiah poking at the name of the king and wondering when God will raise up a real "Zedekiah."

You can imagine this did not win Jeremiah any friends in high places. Jeremiah used to have friends in high places. He used to be the advisor to the king of Judah when Zedekiah's father Josiah had reigned. Together they had championed a serious reform of the temple and the religious life of the nation. After Josiah's untimely death at the hands of the Egyptians, his sons, first Jehoiakim and then Zedekiah had done their best to reverse Josiah's religious program, perhaps as a bit of demagoguery aimed at the many who worshipped the Baals or perhaps out of genuine religious conviction. In any event, Jeremiah, at the point of writing these words, has become a has-been. He was the counselor to a dead king who was not welcome in the courts of the current occupant of David's throne.

How exactly the king was scattering the people is not clear. It could be that his refusal to trust God and to make an alliance with Egypt meant that Jeremiah could see the Babylonians coming once more to finish the job they did in the days of Zedekiah's brother Jehoiakim when they took out the first group of exiles. Perhaps they were already fleeing because they could, like Jeremiah, read he writing on the wall. Jeremiah's assessment of the king is damning. God will not protect him, if anything, God will punish him, will strike him for his evil ways. Salvation will come to the people through another son of David, not this one. For any king, the threat of a distaff member of the royal throne making a bid for the throne was ever-present. Just suggesting this could get Jeremiah in a lot of trouble, even killed as a seditionist.

Of course we are reading this because the righteous branch, the ruler of Israel and the king of Judah who rules justly and wisely is none other than Jesus. That of course makes us his subjects, the sheep gathered who dwell in safety without fear. Does that accurately describe us? Probably not, at least if we listen to the news, but in another respect of course it does. The Devil, our ancient foe, has been defeated. Death no longer has a hold over us, we are free from its clutches. Sin may bedevil us, but it cannot truly terrify us. Jesus has laid down his life for all our guilt, it is gone. We live in a kingdom of Grace.

Where do we encounter this kingdom of Grace, this authority of God's righteous kingdom, ruled over by our just and wise king? Of course kingdoms are all about authority, and in this case it is the authority to do good, to forgive sins, to give life. As members of the baptized community, we are all empowered to be forgivers of sins. When we speak, God assures us that he speaks through us. That is an authority statement. When we say "take and eat, take and drink" that too is an exercise of the authority of God. He is the host at that table, we are His servants, our invitation and our feeding of the flock there is done with his approval, knowledge, plan, and intent. It is authorized. That is why it is important that we do not seize this role and duty, but that it be given to us by the congregation and properly bestowed upon the office we bear.

We live in the "coming days" of which Jeremiah preached. Jeremiah looked forward to days when the righteous reign of God's anointed would be made manifest. We are the manifestation of that kingdom today. Jesus does reign in that justice and righteousness of his Cross and the Gospel he and we proclaim. Sins and sinners are made right, justified. Wrongs are corrected, we are forgiven.

The sermon which wants to pick this up needs to address the fact that too often we don't see what we are doing as the righteous reign of Christ. We look back, we look ahead, but we don't really look now. We go through the motions of Church, but do we really see what we are doing? Do we see that words of forgiveness are a divine act in which wrongs are righted, or do we only see those words as symbols of some far away right-ness that was done on the historic cross and will be revealed on the last day? Is this a way to recast what we do as a community? Do we need to draw attention to the fact that God is at work in these things, more importantly than the fact that we are also participating? Do we see that when we gather this is the body of Christ manifest? Do we see the presence of God in our Eucharist, in the baptisms we perform, in the sermons we preach and hear? Do we notice Christ's face in the one who forgives us and loves us despite what we have done? Can we preach that?

Psalm 24

The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,
² for he has founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

³ Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?

⁴ He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.

⁵ He will receive blessing from the LORD

and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

⁶ Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah

⁷ Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

⁸ Who is this King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle!

⁹ Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.

¹⁰ Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory! Selah

I had hoped to include something from Luther's lectures on this Psalm, but for some reason he never treated it there.

The preacher may well want to choose that wonderful hymn, "Lift Up Your Heads, Ye Mighty Gates" for this Sunday because they quote this psalm.

The psalm has a huge theological point to make. God's kingdom is pure and holy. Who can enter such a place? But we enter such a place in our baptism and will enter such a place on the last day? How does that work? I know my sins and I know that I do not belong in such a holy and pure place? But it is the king of glory who enters, but he enters through me. It is clothed with his glory, righteousness, innocence, and purity that I come to heaven's gate. It opens for me with trumpet blare and angelic praise because I have the very robe of Christ's righteousness wrapped about my mortal frame. I am baptized, I am redeemed!

Romans 13:8-14

⁸ Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. ⁹ For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁰ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

¹¹ Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. ¹² The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. ¹³ Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. ¹⁴ But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

Luther

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ

31. Here he quickly shows all the weapons of light piled up when he admonishes us to dress ourselves in Christ. We put on Christ in two ways: first we dress ourselves in His own virtues, which happens through faith, which relies on the fact that Christ died for us and did all things for us. Not our righteousness but the righteousness of Christ has reconciled us to God and redeemed us from sin. This way [of putting on Christ] belongs to the teaching about faith; in this way, Christ is given to us as a gift and a pledge...

32. In the second way, He is our example and pattern, so that we follow Him and become like Him, clothed in the same virtues He is. About that St. Paul says that we are to put on Christ. Likewise, he writes: "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, let us also bear the image of the man of heaven" (I Corinthians 14:49); and "Put off your old man, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds and put on the new man, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24)

33. Now we see nothing in Christ than only the weapons of light. There is no gorging or drunkenness, but fasting, moderation, and chastising of the flesh with work, traveling, preaching, praying, and doing good to people. There is no laziness, sleeping, and bad habits, but true discipline, purity, chastity, waking, rising, sleeping in the fields, having neither house nor bedroom nor bed. There is no wrath, rivalry, and quarreling, but rather pure goodness, sweetness, love, mercy, patience, etc. For that reason what Paul here says about Christ as our example in a few words he says elsewhere in other words: "Put on, as the chosen saints and beloved of God, hearty mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiven one another if one has a complaint against another; as Christ has forgiven you, so you also [must forgive]. And above all things put on love, which is the bond of perfection" etc. (Colossians 3:12-14).

Likewise when he had commanded the Philippians to love one another and to serve one another, he gives them Christ as an example, who became a servant to us, and says: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though, he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, becoming like any other man, and being found in human form" (Philippians 2:5-8)

(Luther goes on to quote Galatians 5:22-23; II Corinthians 6:1-2; Romans 13:11; and II Corinthians 6:3-10)

What a rich stream flows from the mouth St. Paul! You can abundantly see what the weapons of light are on the left hand and on the right. That truly putting on Jesus Christ.

35. It is a very beautiful feature in this passage that it presents the very highest example, the Lord Himself, when it says, "Put on the Lord" (Romans 13:14). Here is a strong incentive. One would have to be a rogue if he could see his master fasting and enduring hunger, working, watching, and being tired while he himself revels and feasts, sleeps, is lazy and lives in debauchery. What master could tolerate such conduct in a servant? Or what servant would dare attempt it? That cannot be; we must be ashamed when we see Christ and find ourselves to be so much unlike him.

36. Who can incite and motivate the person who is not warmed, admonished, and incited by the Christ's own example? What is to be accomplished by the rustling of leaves and words when the thunderclap of Christ's example fails to move us? Especially for the reason Paul added the word "Lord," saying, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ," as if he would say: "You who are servants, do not [say] much and great things about yourselves, but look at your Lord, who also does this, though he is not obliged [to do so]."

(Luther's Works Vol. 75. CPH, 2013. Pp. 23-25.)

Advent has always had a strand of moral reform and care for the poor running through it. Do you remember the "Good King Wenceslaus" song about the king who had a care for the poor? Paul exhorts us to love our neighbor and puts that at the top of our virtues here. The whole law of God is summed up with that exhortation.

Notice the clothing imagery. The day is almost here, put on the clothes that fit the day, put on the life that fits the work of Christ. The image is really one of someone getting out of bed and getting dressed for the day that lies ahead of them. We do this all the time. If it is a day of fixing stuff around the house, we throw on a pair of old jeans and a t-shirt, but if we are heading off for an interview or making a presentation, it might be a jacket and tie. Paul says we are to get dressed for this day of Jesus which is upon us. In the same way Isaiah exhorted his people: let us walk in the light of the LORD.

Paul seems to think that we can really achieve these things. What does that mean? When you preach that, be aware, this is brutal Law. The expectation that good can really be done will cause some to look at their life and realize that they are in fact not there, does that mean they are not in that kingdom? For some that is a terribly heavy message. It may be the message of Advent but it also needs to have a correspondingly sweet message of the Gospel or the Gospel will be in danger of being missed or overwhelmed. That is a tragedy.

At the same time, we dare not simply give the hearer an out on this. Too often we start of a sermon on a text like this with the words, "I know you are not perfect...." And it rather lets us off the hook for even trying to be perfect. We know we won't make it, so lets just bail on this. That is cheap grace.

Paul's words "put on Christ" as clothing might be well illustrated with simply donning a particular sports team or other jersey which marks us. We might point out our clerical collar, our alb, or some other distinctive dress. If you have a policeman in the congregation, ask if he could not come and show your kids his uniform for the children's lesson, or a firefighter or something like that. we have uniforms all around us. A soldier might work as well if you have active duty folks or national guardsmen/women in your parish. You might just conduct an interview with the person who wears this. Does it change his attitude about who he is, how he acts and behaves? What does it mean to put on that uniform? In a sense, the uniform becomes the city on the hill, the shining light for all to see. We put on Christ, the very love of God expressed to us.

Putting on Christ is something that we often put on for the world, but we take off when we walk in the front doors of our homes. The world sees the façade, they get the real me and the real me

is ugly. Putting on Christ is not a façade, but it is a donning of Christ for every moment of our lives, and it especially transforms the way we treat the people closest to us.

Paul writes with an eschatological urgency, yes, on an individual basis, but also on a corporate basis. They had reason. They thought that the world would end before the last disciple died. How do we speak to that? We have grown comfortable with this waiting thing and wonder if the world will not always go on this way. Can one really be an authentic Christian and believe that the world is not coming closer to the end? Is that essential to our faith? I am not a predispensationalist millennialist wacko who only reads Revelation and Daniel and other such texts, but I also need, in this Adventtide, to remember that Jesus is coming.

Sermon Idea:

Dressed (Epistle – That the Holy Spirit would dress the Christian in the righteousness of Christ and the righteous life of Christ.)

Clothes are so important. If a soldier or a policeman walks into a room in uniform, you know who is there. You might feel safer, you might not, but you have a certain expectation of who that is. You might even remember when we were all exhorted to “dress for success.” There is something about being dressed up, it makes us feel differently, better somehow. What does dressing oneself with Christ do? Surely it makes us feel differently too, but until we get out of the house and into the light of that day, we don’t really see that clothes. We have to put it on.

Paul puts us into the predawn hours this morning, the sun is starting to come up, the day is just starting, and he wonders what clothes we will put on for this day. If I am working in my yard today I will throw on a pair of old jeans and a sweatshirt. But if I am meeting someone important, attending a special meeting, or something like that, I will put on my best.

Paul wants us to imagine today what we will put on for the day that is dawning every day since our baptism. We put on Christ, but if this is not going to be a cliché we will need to put a little flesh on that phrase. Luther tells us that this is whole text is about works and not faith, but I want to remember that the works must come from faith, as Dr. Luther says. Paul speaks of loving one another, of having no debt except to love each other. Of course, Jesus exhorts us to feed the hungry and clothe the man or woman who has not enough to wear. Jesus exhorts us love even our enemies.

For an Advent congregation this may seem like so much pie in the sky, but the preacher really has to believe this and ask them to believe this. First they have put on Christ himself. He is their righteousness and that is complete. But they also put on his righteous life. While we will not attain to perfection, Jesus has poured out his Holy Spirit on us with great effect. It does make positive and good changes in our lives. Paul is not speaking of some impossible ideal when he says we ought to love one another and care for them. Jesus is not just dreaming when he tells us to love the poor man or woman and help them.

The preacher will want to find some handle here. You will need to point out for people concrete examples of folks who today have put on Christ and you can see it. They are dressed for service, peace, love, all the things which are associated with Christ. Will you point to people responding

to the latest disaster? Is there a hero in your local community, or a member of your parish who exemplifies this? Point to them. This is the Holy Spirit dressing his people with the righteous life of Christ.

You might just want to point to the altar, stole, lectern, etc., and point out how they are dressed for the season. The blue is significant. Jesus ascended into the blue sky and the disciples watched that blueness waiting for him to return and the angels promised that from it he would arrive (Advent). You could also point to the black shirt and white vestments you wear as a preacher. The truth be told, a lot of folks won't know why we wear black and why we wear that white robe. Galatians 3:26-27 might be a good cross reference for this sermon.

We might also need to develop the alternative. What are the deeds of darkness today? Paul speaks of gross sexual immorality but also quarreling and jealousy. Is this the attire of darkness? Surely there are more. What are we going to say that they are?

This sermon wants to tell us that when we put on Christ we become the uniform into which we have been put. This should be a little frightening but also empowering for us. Christ's righteousness has been given to us, and now we can live that way. It is not the way of our familiar flesh and its darkened way. It is a new way. If you have an Eagle scout in the congregation, you might have them talk about that uniform and what it means to wear it. If you have a policeman or fireman in the congregation you might try the same thing. You might tell stories about wearing a clerical collar around town.

But we want to go deeper than that. When we put on the uniform it changes our behavior. Schools know this and this is why some of them have turned to uniforms for students. I know this is also why some employers insist on dress codes for their employees. Not only does it communicate something to the customer, but it also brings out a better behavior from the person wearing it. This can be overdone. Sometimes scoundrels also wear nice clothes. Guys in suits are not always the best exemplars.

Matthew 21:1-9

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem and came to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, ² 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. ³ If anyone says anything to you, you shall say, 'The Lord needs them,' and he will send them at once."

⁴ This took place to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet, saying,

⁵ "Say to the daughter of Zion,
'Behold, your king is coming to you,
humble, and mounted on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden.'"

⁶ The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷ They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸ Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹ 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!”

Luther

23. Learn, then, from this Gospel what takes place when God begins to make us godly and what the beginning of becoming godly is. There is no other beginning than that your King comes to you and begins to work in you. It takes place in this way: The Gospel must be first of all. It must be preached and heard. In it you hear and learn how all you do is nothing before God and that everything you do or begin is sin. Your King must first be in you and rule you. See, here is the beginning of your salvation. You fall away from your works and despair of yourself, because you hear and see that all you do is sin and amounts to nothing, as the Gospel tells you, and you begin to receive your King through faith, to cling to Him, to appeal to His grace, and to find consolation only in His goodness.

It is not by your power that you hear and accept this, but by God’s grace which renders the Gospel fruitful in you so that you believe Him. For you see how few there are who accept it, so that Christ for that reason weeps over Jerusalem. Now our Papists not only don’t accept it but also condemn this doctrine, for they will not allow all they do to be sin and nothing; they want to lay the first stone; they rage and fume against the Gospel.

24. Furthermore, it is not in your power or merit to cause the Gospel to be preached and your King to come; God must send Him out of pure grace. Therefore, no greater wrath of God exists than where He does not send the Gospel; there can be only sin, error, and darkness there, no matter what they do. Again, there is no greater grace than where He sends His Gospel, for there fruit and grace must follow together, even if not all, or even only a few, accept it. Thus the most terrible wrath of God is in the pope’s government, so that St. Peter dares to call them “the children of execration” [II Peter 2:1-3], for they teach no Gospel, but only human doctrine about their own works.

25. See, that is what “your King coming” means. You do not seek Him; He seeks you. You do not find Him; He finds you. For the preachers come from Him, not from you. Their preaching comes from him, not from you. Your faith comes from him, not from you. And everything that faith works in you comes from him, not from you. Where He does not come, you remain outside; and where there is no Gospel, there is no God there, but only sin and perdition, no matter how free will can or wants to do, suffer, work, and live.

27. The daughter of Zion has two kinds of possessions from Christ. The first is faith and the Spirit in the heart, by which she becomes pure and free from sins. The second is Christ Himself; there she may boast of the possessions given by Christ, as though all Christ is and has were her own, that she may rely upon Christ as upon her own inheritance.

See, here this is called “He is coming to you” for your good, for your very own. Since He is your King, you receive grace from Him in your heart, so that He helps you from sin and death and thus becomes your King and you, His subject. But by coming to you, He becomes your own, so that you gain mastery of His possessions, just as a bride becomes mistress of her bridegroom’s possessions in addition to the jewelry that he puts on her. Oh, these are pleasant comforting words! Who can despair and be afraid of death and hell when he believes in these words and wins Christ as he own?

(Luther's Works Vol. 75. CPH 2013. Pp. 34-36.)

Advent of course means arrival. We remember that Jesus comes again, but we only anticipate the second coming with any hope when we remember that the one who comes has come before, in humility and love, riding on a donkey, to die for the sins of the world. This reading has marked the beginning of Advent for a very long time.

The preacher who goes this route will want to focus on the simple act of arriving. Jesus is a savior who comes to us. Once he came in blessing, all our sins redressing, sings the hymn. He will come again in glory, but the one who came is the same one who comes. He who has paid the price for my sins will sit in judgment over them. As Hebrews 9 says, "Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him." His fundamental task is not to send me to hellish torment, but to look at his hands and feet and the scars he bears and to tell me that his sacrifice was enough, enough to pay for my sins and my life.

The preacher of this text has a couple of other options. The humility of Christ, riding on a donkey, is preachable. Jesus appears to have been a master of the branding and marketing strategy here. The Jews who saw him would have hearkened to the prophecy in Zechariah 9. They would have seen this as a messianic action on Jesus part and their response to Jesus is telling. They come out with palm fronds, which is what cities did when Alexander the Great was rampaging through this part of the world. They came out with palm fronds instead of weapons to welcome his rule rather than fight against him. They are welcoming the rule of the son of David, the long awaited messiah. The Romans, largely oblivious to Jewish culture, scripture, and tradition, would have scratched their head at Jesus gesture. To them he would have honestly looked like another Jewish peasant on a donkey, not a conquering hero. To them, conquering heroes always rode on horses, the bigger the horse the better. The image, however, has enough ambiguity that the leaders of Jerusalem would have been wondering just what Jesus meant by this. There was no law prohibiting the use of donkey as locomotion. It was not an elegant way to travel. It was suggestive of messianic aspirations, but it was not conclusive. They would have been wondering what was up. Their questioning of Jesus over the next two days suggests that they were attempting to clarify just what he intended by this gesture.

This can then segue into another sermon if you want. The people of Jerusalem who wave the palm fronds and sing their praises may be regular attenders at your worship services. The words of the Sanctus which is the traditional song at the beginning of the communion liturgy picks up on the words of these adoring crowds. You could preach the sacrament as an occasion of the Advent of the King. We sing the same words that they sang when he came to Jerusalem those many years ago because he comes here to this place of worship, this temple, this cross, and altar. Not to die again, but he comes to reign in us.

Sermon Idea

See Your King Comes to You! (That the Hearer would rejoice at the promise of Christ's Advent)

This sermon will speak a word of joyful encouragement to a congregation. Jesus has come and will come. Your king is an arriving king, an Advent King! Having just preached Christ the King last Sunday, now we get to understand what sort of King he is.

Once he came in humility, as we see him depicted here. He came then to deal with our sins through the cross, his death and resurrection. That is vitally important for this description of Jesus. His arrival, his advent, begins with all that we so desperately needed as the rebellious and fallen humanity. He had every right to come in wrath and judgement, wiping clean the slate of his world and beginning anew. But his new creation was not through our destruction, at least not through our complete destruction. Rather, it comes through the slaughter of the old man and the raising up of the new. That took this humble and gentle Jesus to ride this donkey to Jerusalem where later in the week he would carry his own cross to Calvary's cruel brow.

The second coming of Jesus is today – in Word and Sacrament. Not just a ghost of Jesus, not just a little bit of Jesus, but all of him. The wafer we hold in our hand is some minute particle of Christ, it is all of Him, in his fullness. He comes and, in the words of Paul, clothes us with himself. Our baptism, our sacrament, this Word we preach, is nothing less than this Jesus coming today to sustain, nourish and nurture you. He forgives your sins and heals your wounds. He gathers his flock as Jeremiah foresaw, and he reigns in righteousness and justice through forgiveness and ministry today.

But we also want to notice a third coming of Christ, the last coming of our King, in glory and splendor. Advent casts our eyes forward to this coming. This coming too is a rescue, contrary to what the world thinks of it. Of course the world is afraid of Jesus coming. It is going to scraped away and put into the celestial trash compactor, headed for the incinerator. But that is not what we are looking for. The Jesus who comes on that day is our rescuer and champion. You are the triggering event for that second arrival. Jesus comes on his own timetable, but he has said that his timetable is tied to you and your plight. He comes that day because you need his rescue.

Where is the law in Christ's Advent?

1. Is it in our need for this king to come? Our failures will be the cause of his ride into Jerusalem. Our lives are too often lawless and outside his reign, both in terms of our guilt for sins committed but also in terms of the terrible things that happen to us. The Jewish peasants who threw their cloaks on the ground were looking for the king to throw off the Roman oppressor and usher in a new Israel.
2. But we could also talk about the fact that Christ is not a welcome arrival for that old man. He wants Jesus to stay far away. He wants Jesus never to come, for Christ's arrival means his death and destruction. This is law for that part of us that loves our sin and loathes the light. He might have made too many accommodations with the oppressor. The Sadducees did not want the king to come and upset their world.
3. We have a fundamental mistrust of authority. To proclaim a coming king is a problem for some. This means we are not the king, and we like to think that we are in control. Even the disciples struggled with this. Peter wanted to define the kingdom for Jesus, but Jesus would have none of that. We often want the king on our terms, not his terms.

4. We may have a misplaced/misconceived expectation of the king. We often want the king to take care of us. We are not terribly interested in a king who commands and demands of us. We would have a vending machine of a king who will deliver the goods, often expressed in a justice which sees us gleefully watching our enemy fry. We want a king who will take away all the bad stuff, make us healthy and young again, but do we really want the king who rules?

The Gospel we proclaim will address this law, but the reality of proclaiming the coming king often means that we are dealing with all of these sorts of people in the congregation. In a sense we are asking the question of what we are expecting Jesus to do. Do we want Jesus to save us after we have had as much sinful fun as possible? (Is this just another way to look at number 3?) What if this king asked us to minister to that homosexual community down the street? Remember, he has always been critiqued for hanging around the sinners and tax collectors.

Of course the wise preacher needs to realize that he doesn't preach the whole counsel of God this week. Perhaps we will let one, two, or three of these Law developments happen next week or next year.