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Advent 1 Series A 2016

Phillip L. Brandt

Concordia University - Portland, pbrandt@cu-portland.edu

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First Sunday in Advent, Dec 1

The Season of Advent is upon us and it is time for the Christian to spend a moment, but only that, mourning its sad decline. Advent is a very important season that is unfortunately swallowed up in the commercial spending frenzy that the world calls Christmas.

Advent is intended to be a time of penitential reflection when we stand with the people of the Old Testament days, waiting for the revealing of God's great salvation in his Son. We have seen a glimpse in his first coming, but we long for the day when he will be shown to our eyes and we will no longer pine for the perfection that God has written into our hearts but of which sin has cruelly deprived us.

How does one wait? Wal-Mart, Best Buy, Macy's and the rest of the mercantile world says one best waits with credit card in hand spending money you really don't have. God, however, has another vision for people's patient waiting. It involves prayer, penitence, reflection, and the doing of good deeds for the blessing of another human begin.

We still remember and participate in the special midweek services of Advent. These are vestiges of the European tradition of our fathers. These services remember that in Europe the town church conducted worship services every evening, the service of vespers. Mind you, hardly anyone came to these services even there, but the state paid the salary, and the pastor would be there. For Lent and Advent, American Lutherans remembered and returned to this other worship pattern. The daily office never really took hold in America, except in this vestigial form, and now in many places it too is passing away. Our grandfathers and grandmothers met on these Wednesdays in Advent and Lent to pray and hear God's Word. It is the mark of both of these seasons. We pray more. Perhaps you distribute special Advent devotionals from Lutheran Hour Ministries or LAMP, or another entity. This too is a reflection of that prayerful waiting.

The people of God also use this time to do good works. The envelope that you find in the LHM devotional booklet is an attempt to cash in on that, so too is the guy ringing the bell outside the grocery store in this time of the year. God's people often mark this season with good deeds: feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, or caring for their fellow man. This is also a good way to wait for the Lord, to be about His business.

But the principal mark of the season is penitence. We need this Jesus to come. We need this Savior desperately. We need. Advent observed focuses our attention upon our deficiencies and upon the absence of God from our lives. Christmas, if it is to be Christmas, will focus on the presence of God and the blessings he has already brought to us. Both seasons really need one another. They have to have the tension which their respective themes create. What is not frequently observed is that by eliminating the tension created by the penitence, we eliminate the joy of Christmas with it. Unwilling to wait, we chase after the fleeting joy of a new purchase or a gift received without acknowledging that the gift is but a shadow of the great gift of God.

The real tragedy of the season as it is observed (or not observed to be more accurate) is that we are denied the penitence in this season. The songs of Christmas are about the promises fulfilled.



The whole Santa/gifts/commercial Christmas theme is very good, but it is out of time. Because it has eaten our Advent, our Christmas is weakened.

I fear that this juggernaut is too powerful of a cultural force for us to fight. We can insist on not singing Christmas songs until Christmas but we will likely come across as small and crabby. Fighting Christmas is rarely perceived as anything other than the activities of men named Scrooge and Grinch. So, how shall we live in this time? I would like to propose that we simply flip the times. Most of our people are sick of Christmas by the time the day actually arrives. The trees, dry from their long standing in our homes guarding the mountain of gifts that have been piled up under them, are cast out onto the curb on the 26th, which is actually only the second day of Christmas by the liturgical calendar. By the mercantile calendar it is the first day of post-Christmas sales.

I would like to propose that we observe the Advent fast and penitence in the days after the indulgence of Christmas. I am not sure exactly how that works. I am not saying jettisoning Advent entirely. I think the growing light of the Advent wreath, the various traditions of the season are worthy and good. Keep them, but don't get so worked up about holding Christmas at bay until the evening of the 24th. Let the Sunday School program happen on the Sunday before. Valiantly but ineffectually maintaining the purity of Advent in our services while the whole world rushes headlong into Christmas is a recipe for irrelevance. Think of every gift we give in this time as a reminder of the sacrifice which Christ has made for us. See the lights as a prelude of Christmas, calling attention to the Light of the World who was born on that first Christmas day. What I really want to do is baptize the season as it is celebrated. Can we co-opt the current celebration for the people of God? Is it so antithetical to the Christian message that we cannot redeem it?

The season after Christmas Day is much better attuned to penitence for us. The credit card bills come with their cruel demands. The vows we take on New Year's Eve are familiar to anyone who has repented. The scale reports that our holiday feasting needs to be atoned for with misery in the gym and miserly portions at the table. It is our penitential season. Can we preach with that?

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, devout 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 administrative 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.

Readings

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

² It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be lifted up above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,

³ and many peoples shall come, and say:
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob,
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

⁴ He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide disputes for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.

⁵ O house of Jacob,
come, let us walk
in the light of the LORD.

Of course we probably know that verse 4b is inscribed upon the United Nations building in New York. It appears several places in the Bible, but this is the verse. It is the universal hope of all people. Anyone who has seen the ravages of war cannot but hope that the day comes when young men will not have to die in gory battle. Is this the peril of sin that threatens us from which we prayed relief in the Collect? The rescue of Jesus on that last day will certainly entail an end of all war.

How is this realized today? It can certainly be difficult to see; although, perhaps not as hard to see on a microcosm. It was just a week ago we celebrated the reign of Christ the King and that reign does indeed mean that warfare on a personal level can diminish. The barbarians of the Franks, Saxons, Frisians, and Angles were a pretty brutal lot a few centuries ago when Christianity found them. The Norsemen (Norwegians and Swedes) were not good neighbors to have. Christianity might just take credit for taming some of their more warlike characteristics. I was listening to Garrison Keillor some time ago and he threatened someone in a skit with the Norwegian mafia which drew quite a few laughs. Considering their past, it is little short of

amazing that these peoples and others now can be found worshiping together in churches around the world.

These first two sections of Isaiah come within a general presentation of Law to the people of Judah and Israel. The call of Isaiah is still four chapters away. This is almost like an extended prolegomena or introduction to the book. For the Israelites at the time of Isaiah, this time of national grandeur that he describes would have seemed like a faraway dream. The once mighty nation of David had long since been humbled. Divided and divested of most of its empire, it was a petty state on the edge of very great nations. That all would stream to Zion might have felt laughable to the first hearers of Isaiah.

The promise is made, but to the eyes of the citizen of the time it could hardly have been farther away from fulfillment. The nation is actually in an inexorable decline to exile and political destruction. The people will survive but for the most part as a scattered, exiled people.

Of course the Christian reads this now in a very different light. The Law (Torah) of God that has gone forth from Zion was on the lips of Jesus and is the very kerygma, the preaching, of Paul, Peter, and the rest of the Apostles and continues to be preached by the Church. Indeed this has drawn people from all over the world. Today Christianity defines more people than any nation or race. Over two billion people have been baptized and a 100,000 new Christians will be made tomorrow and the next day and the next day, etc. 3 million folks become a Christian every month. The nations indeed are streaming to the one who reigns from Zion's hill, a sacrifice for all.

But even there we might be tempted to wonder when this is going to happen. Here in North America the last census suggested that not one county saw an increase in the percent of Christians. Yes individual churches are growing, but are they growing primarily by taking members from other Christian entities or by rounding up disenfranchised folks who are not worshipping? That is a good thing to do, mind you, but is it evangelism or does it really serve an institutional need? When will we see the unchurched turning to Christ?

Isaiah seems to point us to a day when the nations will flock to the teaching of God. When will we see that? Will we see that? Have we seen that? How you answer those questions actually says a great deal about you and what you believe. So answer them with care.

The fact that the final verse of our reading is an exhortation is also important and might provide the preacher with an excellent segue into the Epistle lesson which also exhorts the people of Rome to walk in the light, as the day draws nearer. The fulfillment of the law which goes out from Jerusalem is love. Isaiah's invitation to walk is described in the verses which follow this verse in Isaiah 2. Isaiah speaks of a nation which has forgotten the covenant and needs to remember it. It seeks answers from Philistine sorcerers, in power, in other gods, etc. To be reasonable and walk the light has a specific content for Isaiah, it is not an empty term.

This would make an excellent advent sermon to preach the real peace that Jesus offers, the peace he spoke to his disciples in the upper room after his resurrection. Isaiah sees a time when people will beat down our doors demanding we teach them our order of life, our way, because they see

our peace. They won't do that until we resolve, and start to live up to that peace which God has given us. Perhaps it is a sermon about forgiving, restoring, and loving the fallen brother or sister in Christ.

Psalm 122

I was glad when they said to me,

“Let us go to the house of the LORD!”

² Our feet have been standing
within your gates, O Jerusalem!

³ Jerusalem—built as a city
that is bound firmly together,

⁴ to which the tribes go up,
the tribes of the LORD,
as was decreed for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the LORD.

⁵ There thrones for judgment were set,
the thrones of the house of David.

⁶ Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
“May they be secure who love you!

⁷ Peace be within your walls
and security within your towers!”

⁸ For my brothers and companions' sake
I will say, “Peace be within you!”

⁹ For the sake of the house of the LORD our God,
I will seek your good.

This is a beautiful psalm if you think about it as the song that one of those folks who are streaming into Jerusalem and God's holy hill are singing.

But it is also a poignant psalm for anyone who has been there and who knows the persistent conflict which has stained Jerusalem for the past centuries. The plea to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is a good Advent plea. It seems to be so far away, and yet we long for it. It is the Advent posture.

Romans 13:(8-10) 11-14

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.

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 dispensationalist 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.

(We get two Gospel options today. The first is the traditional Gospel, the Palm Sunday narrative in which Jesus rides into Jerusalem, his first advent. The second is part of his great eschatological discourse found in chapters 24 and 25.)

Matthew 21:1-11

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.”

⁴This 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.’”

⁶The disciples went and did as Jesus had directed them. ⁷They brought the donkey and the colt and put on them their cloaks, and he sat on them. ⁸Most of the crowd spread their cloaks on the road, and others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. ⁹And 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!” ¹⁰And when he entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred up, saying, “Who is this?” ¹¹And the crowds said, “This is the prophet Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee.”

This is the traditional reading for this day. 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.

This made much more sense before some of the reforms of the liturgy which took place in the middle of the 20th century. Until then, Advent really was the only eschatological season. But with

Christmas slowly eating into the celebration of Advent, the editors of the pericope system decided that we could not afford to lose the eschatological themes of Advent, so they amended the last Sundays of the Church year to accommodate that. It should also be noted that this was surely also somewhat the result of people like Albert Schweitzer whose monumental “Quest for the Historical Jesus” in the early part of the century really recalibrated the thinking of many people. He argued that Jesus was actually more of an eschatological prophet than anything else and that the earliest Church had been profoundly focused on the last things. His ideas have been somewhat tempered over the past century but they continue to wield tremendous influence in academic and ecclesial circles.

The result is that we now have seven weeks of the readings with an end of the world theme. We should have read this text and the next one a couple weeks ago, but here it is, the tradition won't let it off this day.

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. 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.

Or: Matthew 24:36-44

³⁶ “But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. ³⁷ For as were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, ³⁹ and they were unaware until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Then two men will be in the field; one will be taken and one left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding at the mill; one will be taken and one left. ⁴² Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. ⁴³ But know this, that if the master of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. ⁴⁵ “Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom his master has set over his household, to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. ⁴⁷ Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But if that wicked servant says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ ⁴⁹ and begins to beat his fellow servants and eats and drinks with drunkards, ⁵⁰ the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know ⁵¹ and will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

This is from the same discourse in Matthew we heard a two weeks ago in Luke. This whole thing takes place a few days after the triumphal entry but before the crucifixion on Friday. (The Gospel writers really pack a lot into that week!) Jesus words here are occasioned by the disciples when they pointed out the great stones of the temple. Jesus said it was all coming down and they ask “when?” Jesus’ answer is far deeper than the “when” question. Earlier Jesus says that they should not be afraid, the parallel to the passage we read in Luke. In Matthew interestingly enough, he compares the end to the birth pangs of a woman in labor. We have talked about that one before. But labor is both a fearful and an exciting time for a mother. Likewise the Christian is not only afraid, but he or she is more excited for what is about to happen.

In Matthew, in the verses that follow our reading which I have included, and in the next chapter, he told three parables and a really interesting story. The parables are of the Returning Master, the Ten Virgins and the Talents. The really interesting account is of the Sheep/Goat judgment at the end of chapter 25 which is not really a parable, at least it is missing some of the marks of a parable. What exactly that story of the sheep and goat judgment is, that is not so clear.

Here, in these words, Jesus seems to be saying that the time of the eschaton is a complete mystery to us. It is like the destruction that fell upon the people at the time of Noah. Some were

getting married, others were eating and drinking, suddenly they were gone. You have to wonder why all the synoptic Gospels include a variation of this. It must have been an issue for them. I would guess that there was more than one overly excitable person running about claiming to know the last day's date.

Please notice that this is the text that the rapture crowd uses. But also notice that the obvious reading of the text is that the people at the time of Noah were taken by the flood and destroyed. In the last day, the one in the field who is taken is not taken to heaven. It never says that. Like the person in Noah's day, it seems they are taken by some sort of destruction. The guy who is left is the saved one. Le Hay and his cohorts from Dallas have not quite read the text as carefully as they want, or at least they have found only what they are looking for.

I think, though, that the real message is in the last part, this makes sense of the parable that immediately follows. This is, in fact, another very brief parable. Jesus likens the end of the world to the owner of a house who does not know when the thief is coming, but he is ready for the thief. How are you ready for a thief? You use common sense. You lock your doors. You don't leave the bicycle out on the front lawn. You take the keys out of your car and lock the doors at night. You might put a motion sensor light out on the front and back yards or something like that. That does not mean the thief is not going to come. But it means that if you hear the glass breaking in the basement as he tries to get in, you know that dialing 911 will get the cops there.

What does that mean for the Christian who knows that the Savior comes? Motion sensor lights seem a little out of place here and so do locking the doors. The disciples tried that on the night of the first Easter. It didn't work then and I doubt it will work this time either. But then again, we are not waiting for a thief, but for the Lord of heaven and earth. A famous illustration tells of a man traveling in Italy who comes upon a great estate, immaculately kept. He sees the gardener out front and strikes up a conversation. He learns that the owner lives at another estate in Rome. He has not been out to visit in 20 years. "But you keep it looking so nice!" exclaimed the visitor. "You act as if he could come tomorrow." The gardener replied, "Oh no, sir, today, he might come today."

The person prepared is simply about his job. He is not looking up into the sky. The gardener did not watch down the road to see if the master would come and then begin to do his job. He was about the task of being a good servant that day. So what are you going to do with today? Advent challenges us with this question. Our deficiencies are great, will they be a little less after today? Will you make a contribution to a solution, no matter how small or will you simply add to the problem? The servants of God have multiple callings in life. The master expects to find us about those callings on the day of his return, that is the prepared Christian.

Law

1. It is easy to look about and wonder if Jesus is ever coming again. The people of Israel had that temptation and the people of this day have it. It leads to a certain moral and spiritual decay. What we do does not really matter. The little things are just that, little things which have no real importance.
2. But this is a serious trap. The sins which entangles us also leads to a sort of spiritual numbness to these little things. These things are not truly little in the eyes of God. The culture may not value your marriage or your honesty or your care for the neighbor down the street, but God cares a great deal. God has expectations for our life.
3. As the day of the Lord draws nearer with every moment, we really ought to be growing brighter. Our rescuer and savior after all comes to us. But the dinginess of the world seems to cling to us. If anything, we may feel that we have grown colder and dimmer as the years pass. Does this mean something terrible for us?
4. If Jesus is growing closer and the light is getting brighter, why is our church shrinking? That may be asked of your own congregation, it could be asked of your whole Synod. Has the Spirit left us for greener pastures? Where is this stream of people that Isaiah envisions?
5. It is hard not to know the details. It is hard not to know when Jesus comes again. If I knew the day or hour I might be better prepared, but as it is, I am floundering in a world of multiple decisions and confusion. I could really use some clarity here.

Gospel

1. Jesus' promise is sure. He who is our rescuer and deliverer will indeed come to us. But in the meantime he also has not left us completely bereft of himself or his strength. By His Word we know that the love we share is His love and it is empowered by His Holy Spirit. Even the little things of life are opportunities for Him to do great things.
2. The realization that my life is an opportunity for Him to work in the lives of neighbors and others, empowers me to live it differently. No, not perfectly. We all know that. But there is no day other than this day and he has given me this one to do with it what I may. He would love to do something through me today. It might be a visit, it might be a gift, it might be a kind word, or a hug. It might be something truly great, but it might be totally un-noticed by anyone but him. But he loves to work with you on that.
3. God's mercy and graciousness are great. Moses was 80 years old when he got started in his career. Paul had been a murderer and persecutor. God is not so worried about

your past. He can handle that. He would like to do something about your present. For he has much to do before that great and glorious day. There are many people to be reached and he has not sent angels or heavenly beings, but he has sent you. Your sins and weakness uniquely qualify you as a bearer of this message. As one forgiven you can both speak with care/concern for the sinner and first hand you can tell the good news that Jesus does indeed love sinners.

4. The Church has always cycled. It is in fact growing in many parts of the world and it may well be that Jesus is making ready to grow this part of the world again. He will use holy people and holy places to do this. The situation is never so bleak that He cannot do something great about it, and often in the bleakest of days he does his very best work.
5. There is a great comfort in not knowing the details of the end. I believe they would be too terrible to bear. As it is, we can trust the one who loves us to handle all the arrangements. He is good at this. He brought shepherds to a manger, he brought wise men from afar. He brings people to the waters of baptism today and he can bring us where we need to be when we need to be there. Trust him. He really does know what he is doing.

Sermon Themes:

1. Swords into ploughshares... (OT – That the hearer would, by the working of the Spirit through this word, embrace peace as God’s way starting with the people who are closest, namely family, friends, co-workers, etc.)

This sermon could go down a pretty radical path of peacenik theology. I don’t want to go there, but my fear of such an end cannot keep me from preaching the truth of this passage. God loves peace, and he says blessed are the peace-makers, not the war-makers nor the people who delight in conflict. The LCMS has a terrible reputation as a body of believers who devour one another in internecine conflict. We can do little about what other people think of the national body, but we can address what happens within the community to which God has called us to worship. We want to proclaim peace as a viable and real way to live.

The preacher will likely want to talk about all sorts of conflict which afflicts this planet, our community, our homes. As I write this, I am looking at the notes from three years ago. At that time our president had just attended a meeting of NATO as they try to sort out the situation in Afghanistan. Now the Secretary of State is attending a meeting about Iran. The places change, the subject never does. My own neighborhood has seen a real upsurge in gang violence, domestic violence, and even violent crime. Recently we looked down the street and there must have been 20 police cars with lights flashing a couple of

blocks down. I was shocked a few days ago, while bringing my children to school to see a SWAT team truck cross my path on the way home from some operation not far away.

God hates all this, wars in which young men and women die, crime, and terror, domestic violence and the many more scourges we could list.

Isaiah sees a day when the swords are beaten into ploughshares, the spears into pruning hooks, because they are no longer needed. God's peace reigns on that day. They will no longer learn warfare on that day. Even West Point and Annapolis will be shuttered. No more need for such training.

But we are not there, and we know it. Yet, could it be that God calls us this advent to get a little closer. He has not called us to a complacency about violence and bloodshed of any sort, either the real physical kind or the more subtle sort of bloodshed that comes to voters meetings with a "take no prisoners" sort of mentality. It is simply not his way, and because it not his way, it is not our way either. When the first Christian missionaries came to our own parents in Saxony and other parts of Europe many years ago, they were barbaric, warlike people. The peaceful Danes, Swedes, and Saxons we think of today were hardly that a millennia ago. Hagar the Horrible was not a joke to folks of that time.

Real progress can be made. I think we forget that while God has a great eschatological hope for us in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ, he also has real hope for this day as well. We Christians have an amazing gift, one which sometimes takes many years to see its full fruition. That gift of course is forgiveness and love which Christ has poured abundantly into our hearts.

How does one make ready for the Christ-child and the celebration of his birth? Is it not by letting the love which brought him to the manger empower our lives and words and deeds today. Forgive an enemy today. Heal a wound, restore a broken relationship, and love someone, even a scoundrel.

2. Ready (Gospel – That the Holy Spirit would give the hearer confidence and strength to lead the life of expectant service.)

This sermon is really based on the second Gospel reading and may want to extend into that parable which falls right after it. Jesus exhorts his hearers to preparedness with an illustration which sounds like it is lifted right out of an ad for a household alarm system. But as Jesus expands upon and clarifies what he means, he is not talking about a thief who comes to kill and destroy, but a master of servants who comes to reward and commend. The one who is ready for this moment which is unknown is the one who is simply about the good things which God has given him or her to do.

This does a couple of things for us. First of all, it should remove some of the anxiety from this situation and inoculate the hearer from the goofy messages that pass for Christian end

of the world talk sometimes. God does not ask his people to put on white robes, stand on hill tops, sell all their possessions and give the money to the spiritual leader as a way to prepare for his coming. Jesus' coming will be sudden and without warning, and he will be delighted to find mothers caring for their children, men and women working at their jobs, children doing their homework, etc. He is not asking us to do something out of the ordinary in that sense. He may well come at noon in Israel which will likely find us all in bed here in America.

But the Christian is more than simply a parent, child, neighbor, friend, etc., he is also a witness to Christ and his love. Being part of a community which is dedicated to announcing that good news to this community is also part of our job. Being engaged in the ministry of his kingdom to the little, least, and lost is also part of our job description. Having a role to play on the local soup kitchen's board or serving on the board of Elders or just having an eye out for the old lady who lives by herself down the street is all part of this.

While the words of Jesus don't mean we are supposed to do something oddly dramatic, it is not completely without shape. Like the servant in that parable we have things which are set before us as the children of God in this time and place. Looking up into the sky to spy a Jesus from afar is not one of them, but keeping our attention on the things to which he has called us is one of those things.

3. Dressed (Epistle – That the Holy Spirit would prompt the hearer to examine how he/she is dressed for the life to which God has called them today and to put on Christ.)

Clothes is 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 think today about 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. Paul speaks of loving one another, of having no debt except to love each other. Isaiah speaks of peace. 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. While we will not attain to perfection, Jesus has also 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. Isaiah is not laughing into his hat when he tells us about the peace which the world will find so attractive.

The preacher will want to find some handle here. You might throw upon your screen a picture of Francis hugging the disfigured man which was in the news this morning. You might point to all the folks who are helping out in the Philippines or something like that. 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.

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).

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?

4. Debt Free (Epistle – That the Spirit of God would free us from all debts and free us to the indebtedness of mutual love.)

Here is the sermon idea we generated six years ago and tweaked last time around: Patient waiting. (That the hearer would have a healthy perspective on the suffering of this life and thereby be empowered to serve in the kingdom of God.) I want to play with these words, perhaps too cute but it might just be fun:

- I. The word patient is not only a fine adjective which encompasses a virtue we all would like to have, but it is also a noun, a person who is being seen by the doctor. Our condition is somewhere between the noun and the adjective, in fact we are simultaneously patient and a patient. We must be patient upon God's timetable. That is only possible because he has offered us great promises in which we may place our hope. So we are patient, but at the same time we are also patients in the great divine hospital called the Church. (We are all sicko's) He is not calling the good and perfect

folk today any more than he did so long ago when Matthew heard the call from his tax collectors booth. Jesus caught some heat for that new recruit, and he is willing to look upon all our faults and treat them as the great physician, healing with a touch, comforting, straightening out the crooked limbs and restoring the lost senses. If we would be patient, we must be a patient. The Great Physician of our lives is working patience in us through his gracious Spirit and Word and Gifts.

- II. The word waiting also has a double meaning. We know that we wait for the Lord, we don't really have much of a choice. I cannot speed the day of his arrival, except to pray for it. But there is another sort of waiting. This is the waiting of the fellow who brings me my dinner at a restaurant. This sort of waiting is called service. Being the patient patients we are also waiting by waiting/waitressing. That same great physician, that Jesus, has healed my greatest illness, he has given me a heart transplant of sorts. Now, his love flows out of me. In Paul's words, I "put on Christ." Or in the words of Isaiah to his countrymen, I "walk in the light of the LORD." My swords have been hammered into much more fruitful plowshares, my spears are serving me much better as pruning hooks. I like fruit much better than battles. What once was met with violence, anxiety, and animosity, is now an occasion for Christ's forgiveness of sins and eternal life to shine.
- III. Jesus in this time of Advent calls us to Patient Waiting in all its meanings. He heals us and gives us hope, we are his patients. He holds the hard questions in his hand (so we wait for him with peace and confidence - patiently). So we wait and we wait for he gives this day meaning and purpose, a valued service within his kingdom. (Can you imagine the tip he is going to drop on the table at the end of time? :-) I am a waiter.