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The Season of Advent

By FRED H. LINDEMANN

[EDITORIAL NOTE: This article represents a part of a larger manuscript entitled "The Sermon and the Propers" and is intended for eventual publication in book form. With permission of the writer we shall present other sections in the course of the church year.]

THE great festivals of the church year are provided with a period of days that precedes and follows them as a season of preparation for and application of the central teaching. The Feast of the Nativity is preceded by the Advent season and followed by the twelve days culminating in the Festival of the Epiphany and the Epiphany season. The season of Advent precedes the Nativity of our Lord to prepare not for God's birth as a true man but for the commemoration of this historic event.

The dominant idea of Advent is the thought of the Lord's coming. The Propers of the Liturgy recognize a threefold coming: the coming in the flesh, the coming in glory, and the coming in grace. In Advent the Liturgy prepares for a worthy and proper commemoration of our Lord's first advent, the historical event that lies in the past. However, the church is not content to remind her children of a past event that can be called to remembrance but cannot be experienced. In the first coming she sees a picture of the invisible coming in grace that can be and is experienced in the present and of the visible coming in glory that shall be experienced in the future.

Even a superficial study of the Propers will reveal that the texts present the three advents in almost bewildering fashion. Abruptly they pass from the past to the present or the future. At times they present two or all three advents in the same sentence. What is the purpose of the Liturgy? Are we to commemorate an event of history, or are we to receive present grace, or are we to prepare for the next world?

To understand the Liturgy, and before we can put it to profitable use, we must realize that an element of dramatic play or playful drama is involved. Liturgy is a play, but it is not a game without content of truth or reality. The interplay and mixture of the three comings is the holy play of the Liturgy. For profitable application it is necessary that we keep in mind that Liturgy is a matter of the

present and of reality. References to the past and to the future serve the present.

The Propers will prove restrictive and mildly annoying unless the preacher sees clearly that the almost exclusive emphasis on the birth of a babe in romantic and appealing circumstances is something comparatively new in the Christian Church and quite out of harmony with the Liturgy. The Propers of the Sundays in Advent cannot be adapted to the modern secularized observance of Christmas. The human birth of our Lord is not the only object of the Christmas celebration. Our Lord's first coming may be gratefully pondered in memory, and such commemoration has spiritual value. But Advent must not be degraded to a mere sentimental pre-Christmas observance. Efforts to create an artificial atmosphere of expectancy as a preparation for the Nativity are futile. The first advent lies in the past and can no longer be expected. Modern men lack the power of imagination required to live the paradox of eagerly awaiting and expecting an accomplished fact of history as if it were to take place in the immediate future. Advent is not to prepare for the Nativity. It is to prepare for the commemoration of this past event. The Liturgy dramatically employs the historic fact as a picture of the constant advent in grace and of the second advent in glory. It brings home to us that our Lord comes to us daily after the manner of His first advent. His earthly life and work are a mighty picture of His gracious activity in the church and in the souls of men. The Liturgy forcefully reminds us that the Lord who once came in humility and lowliness will come again in glory and power. Preparation and expectation there will be as we commemorate the first coming, but the preparation will be for the coming in grace and for the second coming, the expectation will be of the second coming, resulting in watchful preparation.

Christmas loses nothing of its actual meaning when we approach the Nativity as the Liturgy prescribes. On the contrary, some permanent reality is given the celebration. The more recent view that the temporal birth is the object of the celebration is not borne out by the history of the Liturgy or by the liturgical texts even as we have them today. The whole Liturgy becomes meaningless the moment we accept the new view. From the beginning to the end it prays for the coming of Christ as the fulfillment of our hope.

If the coming we have in mind is that of our Lord's nativity, how can we still pray for it? What meaning can such hope have since the object has already been fully realized in the past? We cannot make our own the expressions of expectation by the patriarchs and prophets as the Advent Liturgy gives them. The Introit for the First Sunday in Advent brings the words of David: "Let none that wait for Thee be put to shame." The Gradual paraphrases: "All they that wait for Thee shall not be ashamed." When the worshiper hears these words, he is to make them his own. He is waiting for the Lord. The Lord is coming. Is the worshiper waiting for the first coming? Why should he be waiting, and why should he pray that he be not put to shame? The Lord came two thousand years ago. The Introit and the Gradual make sense to him only if he waits for the Lord to come to His church in the means of grace and finally in glory to deliver from all evil.

In the Collect for the First Sunday in Advent the worshiper prays: "Stir up Thy power and come." Is the Lord to come at Christmas in Bethlehem? On the Second Sunday we pray: "Stir up our hearts to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds." What way are we to make ready? The way of His birth? Or the way on which He comes into our hearts and lives? By His coming into our hearts we are enabled to serve God with pure minds. On the Third Sunday the church's prayer is: "Lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation." What visitation? The birth or the visitation of grace by Word and Sacrament? Also the prayer of the Gradual, "Stir up Thy strength, and come and save us," surely refers to His coming in grace and in glory. On the Fourth Sunday we again pray: "Stir up Thy power and come." Do we pray that He come to Bethlehem at Christmas? No, He has come. We pray that by the help of His grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished.

The words of the Epistle for the First Sunday, "Salvation is nearer to us than when we first believed," (RSV), do not refer to the Nativity, as though Christmas were nearer now than it was when we first believed. The cry of the Introit for the Second Sunday, "Behold, thy Salvation cometh," does not speak of the Nativity. The Nativity as such is not redemptive, considered apart from

the redemption won on the cross. Our rebirth cannot be through some fancied participation in Christ's human birth. Only through a participation in the death and resurrection of Christ are we born to a new life in Holy Baptism. The Gradual for the Second Sunday declares: "Our God shall come." This, too, cannot refer to God's coming in Bethlehem. When the Epistle for the Second Sunday says, "That ye may abound in hope," it must be obvious that the Romans were not to abound in hope of the first advent. What could be more artificial, more unhealthy, than to make us act as if we were people for whom Christ was yet unborn? How could we seriously ask of God that the Savior should be born to us when we know that He was born long ago and the fact that He was born is a basis of our faith?

Nevertheless, all that has been said should make us readier to utter the words of the Old Testament saints with our own lips. We can do this because the human birth of Christ was not, in and of itself, the object of their hope and expectation. They were hoping for the advent of the kingdom of God, for the complete destruction of the powers of evil, for the abolition of sin and death, for the final manifestation of God to His people. This is what we still expect. The first coming, far from satisfying our expectation, has brought it to an even higher pitch of intensity. That this is the meaning of Advent and its perpetual actuality is borne out by the texts of the Christmas Liturgy. They sing chiefly of the theophany, the divine appearance of the King of Glory. The first Epistle for the midnight or early service declares: "The grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men, training us . . . awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (RSV). The Gradual sings: "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool." These Christmas texts announce the final Kingdom, the Parousia, the showing forth in glory of the King of Eternity. When in our preparation for Christ's coming we do not attempt to limit our thoughts to the first, but include the constant coming in grace and the second coming in glory, our Advent preparation will quite naturally become a self-examination as to our personal relation to the God who came to earth on Christmas to suffer and die and rise again; who comes to us constantly in His Word and Sacrament,

offering and ministering grace and salvation; who shall come again in power and glory to complete our salvation by destroying death and leading us to eternal life with Him.

Keeping in mind that the season of Advent is the time in which the faithful are to prepare for our Lord's coming and not merely for the commemoration of a historic event in which we cannot participate, the thoughts suggested by the Propers for the four Sundays in Advent could be arranged as follows:

MAKE READY FOR THE LORD'S COMING!

- I. The Need of Preparation
- II. Preparation by the Book
- III. Preparation by the Church
- IV. Preparation by Christ Himself

THE EPISTLES

- I. How to Make Ready
- II. The Book of Hope
- III. The Ministry
- IV. The Sum — Realization of Christ's Presence

THE HOLY GOSPELS

- I. The Manner of Preparation
- II. A Message of Hope
- III. The Master and the Minister
- IV. He Stands Among You

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

The commemoration of our Lord's birth has become the outstanding feature of the Christmas season. The weeks before the Holy Nativity are given over almost completely to the first advent. Modern Christendom has made the season a holy drama of the birth. As the antidote against the tendency to secularize and sentimentalize the Nativity, the Liturgy not only offers history and memory but also impresses on the faithful the reality of a present grace by teaching that the first advent be regarded as a symbol and picture of the Lord's constant coming in grace, of Christ's advent in His Word and Sacrament.

The First Sunday in Advent is the church's New Year, the beginning of the Christian year, the year of grace. The year begins with the believing, waiting, expectant church looking forward to the coming of the Promised One, the Savior. As we enter the year, we are greeted by the announcement: "Behold, your King is coming to you!" For His coming we prepare in these weeks. His advent on the great day of the Nativity is not and can never be an actual experience, for it is an event of the past. Also His coming in grace through Word and Sacrament is nothing new. We have never been without His gracious presence. He never ceases to come in His grace and to bless us. If, then, we are to prepare for the historic event of the advent in Bethlehem, the purpose of our preparation can only be to make us thoroughly conscious of the relation in which we stand to Him. We do not wish to commemorate the Nativity merely with the thought of a little Babe born in a stable or as the anniversary of a historical event. At the manger we must realize what we really are and where we stand in the light of the completed plan of which Christmas is a part. When we hear that our King is coming, this is the call to prepare by opening our hearts to His grace. We need not fear, for He comes in meekness and lowliness. But He comes as King, mighty to save, full of grace and truth.

When we speak of the First Sunday in Advent as the beginning of a new year, this does not mean that something new is actually beginning. The Last Sunday after Trinity has more of Advent than of Trinity. The Introit for the Sunday before Advent speaks of the coming of the Alpha and Omega. "The tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them. . . . God shall be with them. . . . Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be lift up, ye everlasting doors, and the King of Glory shall come in." The Epistle calls upon the faithful to be ready for the Lord's coming. "Come, Lord Jesus!" rings through the Gradual. The Gospel ends on the note: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." The Propers for the First Sunday in Advent, the first in the new year, carry this thought over from the last of the old year. The faithful are waiting, trusting. Let none that wait for Thee be put to shame! Stir up Thy power and come! The Epistle instructs how to prepare for the advent. It is clear that we shall not fully meet

the requirements of the Propers for this First Sunday if we limit the advent to our Lord's coming to His earthly Zion in His Word and Sacrament.

The Introit. "Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. O my God, I trust in Thee; let me not be ashamed, let not mine enemies triumph over me. Yea, let none that wait on Thee be ashamed. Show me Thy ways, O Lord; teach me Thy paths."

A new year begins. We know not what it will bring. But it will be a year of grace. God will come to His beloved day by day and lead them to green pastures and still waters. The personal note is clear. Confidently, trustingly I lift my soul to God. I have powerful enemies, but God will not permit them to triumph. I wait on Him for help and deliverance. He will show me His ways and teach me His paths. The promised and accepted relationship is individual and personal.

The Collect. "Stir up, we beseech Thee, Thy power, O Lord, and come; that by Thy protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins, and saved by Thy mighty deliverance; who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end."

This prayer is addressed to God the Son. We pray, "Come! Maranatha!" For what? Rescue and deliverance from sin and its consequences. We wait, we hope, we trust. Sinners exiled from God, beset by powerful enemies, threatened by the perils of our sins, we pray that the Son of God stir up His power and come. This is the great prayer of preparation throughout the Advent season until Christmas Eve. We are preparing for Christmas; but if we are ready for one manner of coming, we are equally ready for every coming in life or death. We pray not only that the Lord take possession of our souls when He comes at Christmas, not only that He come in His Word and Sacrament through the year that lies ahead, but also that He come and save us by His mighty deliverance at His second coming in glory.

The Epistle, Rom. 13:11-14. We dare not lose sight of the fact that the preparation of which St. Paul speaks here is for the second coming at the end of the world. The advents are connected. If we are prepared for our Lord's coming in His Word and Sacrament, we are fully prepared also for the second coming. At the first He

came to purchase salvation by His death, at the second He will come to bring the fullness of salvation. He who lives in readiness for the advent in glory is prepared to receive the King when He comes visibly in Bethlehem and also invisibly in His means of grace. The Epistle instructs as to the manner in which we are to prepare for Christ's advent, past, present, and future. Below is an attempt to outline this lesson of the Epistle.

The Gradual. "All they that wait on Thee shall not be ashamed, O Lord. Show me Thy ways, O Lord; teach me Thy paths. Show us Thy mercy, O Lord, and grant us Thy salvation."

We have here an echo of the Introit and the Collect. The Gradual connects the thoughts of the Epistle with those of the Gospel. The rubric states that "when the Gradual is omitted, the Alleluia or the Sentence for the Season may be sung." Therefore the Sentence is included at this point.

The Proper Sentence. "Alleluia! Remember, O Lord, Thy tender mercies, for they have been ever of old. Alleluia!"

The Gospel, Matt. 21:1-9, proclaims to the waiting church that the events of Palm Sunday were a fulfillment of the hope and expectation stirred up and kept alive by ancient prophets. Isaiah had promised: "Behold, your Salvation comes." Zechariah had foretold: "Lo, your King comes to you; triumphant and victorious is He, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt, the foal of an ass" (RSV). He comes to His people meek and lowly, yet triumphant and victorious, bringing salvation, glorious in His power to save. Stir up Thy power and come, the power of the King who comes to redeem and save, the power of Immanuel, God with us.

The Proper Preface. "Whose way John the Baptist prepared, proclaiming Him the Messiah, the very Lamb of God, and calling sinners to repentance that they might escape from the wrath to be revealed when He cometh again in glory."

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE EPISTLE

How to Prepare for Our Lord's Advent

A. By knowing the time, its shortness, possibilities, uncertainty, and its inadequacy for the solemn work to be done in it. Fear of the King's displeasure and judgment or the desire to escape His condemnation are not the motivation. We are drawn by the Love

that prepared our redemption and gave us the hope of salvation. There is urgency, for the salvation our Lord will bring at His return is nearer to us now than when we were brought to faith. Yet its nearness should curb our impatience and instill new hope. Then let us hold fast a little longer.

B. By using the time. This life is the night, eternity is the morning. The night is far spent. We are to cast off the works and ways of this life's darkness and put on the armor of light, the holiness that is bright and safe as armor, that wearing it and fighting in it to the last, we may be welcomed by the King at His appearance.

C. By putting on Christ. His merits are to be our hope, His life is to be our example, His character is to be as the clothing of our spirits. Clothed in the light, Satan cannot hurt us, and the King will recognize us as His own. So shall we be fully prepared for His coming.

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE HOLY GOSPEL

For our example the holy Gospel tells us how Jerusalem prepared to meet her King, that we may prepare to meet Him as He comes to His holy city, His church.

A. The preparation by the disciples. Two disciples were sent to make preparations for the King's entry, very simple but very significant preparations, showing both His great humility and His kingly claims. Only dimly at best did the disciples sense the significance of what they were doing and what was to follow, but they knew their Lord, His power and omniscience, and followed His directions trustingly and willingly. His disciples today must labor with such readiness for their Lord's sake. He needs many loyal and eager hearts to come in triumph.

B. The preparation of the multitude. The people prepared His way as best they could with garments and branches. They prepared also a sweet song of salvation for the Savior-King. The desire for salvation is the great mark of readiness. "Hosanna, save now!" is the song the King longs to hear as He comes.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

A practical application of the day's main thought to the Lord's Supper will be appreciated by the faithful. The majority has been instructed and trained to come to the Lord's Table solely to receive

forgiveness and has never learned to look for and expect the almost countless fruits of forgiveness. In speaking to his flock of life and salvation as the blessed fruits of forgiveness, the shepherd must ever keep in mind that he is dealing with saints of God, sanctified and holy men and women. They were washed clean in Holy Baptism. In the preparatory part of the service they were again assured in the name of the Triune God and by His authority that all their sins were cast into the sea of forgetfulness. Throughout the Liturgy they speak to God and He to them as redeemed and forgiven. By eating and drinking they are about to proclaim that they firmly believe the Lord Jesus died for them. They are not coming to the Lord's Table solely to seek forgiveness or to proclaim that they are forgiven. These saints go beyond forgiveness also to the blessings and gifts that are theirs as a result and consequence of their forgiveness. They eat and drink in remembrance of their Lord, to His memory or memorial. They recall not only that He died for them. True, He whom they remember was never more Himself than in His death for them, but there is more about Him to remember. To remember Him, His Person, means to recall all about Him, all that He was and is, all that He said and promised, all that He did, does, and will do. They remember that He redeemed and saved them not only from the consequences but also from the power and bondage of sin. By His death He purchased them to be His own that they may live under Him and serve Him as their King.

What is there to remember about our Lord and King on the First Sunday in Advent? The Proper Preface for Advent speaks of preparing for His coming by repentance and of His coming again in glory. On this Sunday we emphasize His gracious coming in Word and Sacrament. Our King comes to live with us for another year in grace and mercy. He brings us salvation. Our redemption is finished, but the application of salvation is a continuing process. Day by day He saves us from some besetting sin, some weakness or doubt or unbelief, from self-love and selfishness and lovelessness. He comes in His Word and Sacrament. Historical Lutheranism does not divide into coming in His Word and coming in His Sacrament. For the two cannot be separated. The sermon is not exclusively the Word. Our Small Catechism states that in the Holy Sacrament Christ's words are as the chief thing besides

bodily eating and drinking. So the Word of Christ is also in the Lord's Supper. Our Liturgy brings the Word, in the Introit, Collect, Epistle, Gradual, Gospel, Preface, Sanctus, Benedictus, Narrative, and during Communication. In the Lord's Supper the King comes to His beloved in His Word.

As we eat and drink, we enter into communion with the King of our salvation. We become parties to the covenant of forgiveness that was established when He gave His body and shed His blood. By entering upon the covenant, we acknowledge Christ to be our King and pledge to serve Him. We agree to cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. We resolve to conduct ourselves becomingly and to make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. We put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Our Lord's coming to Jerusalem as Savior and Deliverer reminds us that our King will come again to bring full salvation and complete deliverance to His own. The night is far spent and this salvation is nearer than when we first came to believe. We pray that by our King's power we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by His mighty deliverance. As the believer enters into communion with his King, he enters upon the agreement that he will prepare his heart by faithfully and trustingly obeying his Lord in the ways He will show him and in the paths He will teach him.

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT

This week completes an Advent cycle. The message of the First Sunday was: "Your King is coming! Prepare!" The Propers spoke of His visible coming to Jerusalem in humility and meekness, on His way to the cross. This was a picture of His constant coming in His Word and Sacrament, invisible, without outward glory and power. The message of the Second Sunday is: "Your King is coming again, visibly and in power and glory, to deliver His own from all evil!" It is a message of encouragement and hope.

The Introit. "Daughter of Zion, behold, thy Salvation cometh. The Lord shall cause His glorious voice to be heard, and ye shall have gladness of heart. Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock."

Many ignore and reject the Lord now, but the day is coming

when His majestic voice will fill His enemies with terror. However, this is not the heart of today's message. The teaching of the day is addressed to the faithful. "Behold, thy Salvation cometh!" You shall be delivered from your enemies. All who receive the King as He comes to His Zion in Word and Sacrament, all who remain faithful until the end shall then have gladness of heart. The psalm verse will be more readily understood in the light of the fact that originally the entire Psalm was chanted, in this instance the Eightieth. "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that leadest Joseph like a flock! Thou who art enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh! Stir up Thy might, and come to save us! Restore us, O God; let Thy face shine, that we may be saved!"

The Collect. "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Thine only-begotten Son, so that by His coming we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds."

We can no longer make ready for the first advent, as this lies in the past. But our Lord's first advent is a picture of the constant coming to His church in Word and Sacrament. This is the connection established by the Collect between the commemoration of the first coming in lowliness and the second advent in glory. All gladness of heart at the prospect of the King's coming in glory is possible only if His first and His constant coming enables us to serve Him with pure minds.

The Epistle, Rom. 15:4-13. "Thy Salvation cometh!" "Ye shall have gladness of heart." "Stir up our hearts that we may be enabled to serve Thee with pure minds." The Lord promised to save and deliver us at His second coming. As we wait and longingly look for His appearance, we might grow weary and discouraged. "That by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." When St. Paul speaks of hope, he means unquestioning confidence and certain conviction. The Old Testament was written to instill and maintain hope in the hearts of the waiting believers, Jews and Gentiles. It is a Book of hope. Its very object was to kindle and keep alive hope. Its covenants all pointed to a better covenant, its sacrifices to a more availing sacrifice that could take away sin, its prophecies to a better dispensation in the dim future. It is a record of men who trusted God's promises and

were not disappointed. These Scriptures were written for our learning.

The Gradual. "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God hath shined; our God shall come. Gather My saints together unto Me, those that have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice. Alleluia! Alleluia! The powers of heaven shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Alleluia!"

The unity of thought with the other Propers becomes even clearer from the context in Ps. 50:1-5 (RSV): "The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes, He does not keep silence, before Him is a devouring fire, round about Him a mighty tempest. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that He may judge His people: Gather to Me My faithful ones, who made a covenant with Me by sacrifice." In the Epistle, St. Paul writes: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The Proper Sentence. "Alleluia! Remember, O Lord, Thy tender mercies; for they have been ever of old. Alleluia!"

The Gospel, Luke 21:25-36. The teaching of the day centers here, in our Lord's own prophecy concerning His second coming. The days of sin and trial, of time and the world, will end in victory and complete restoration. Our Lord is here speaking to His own, to cheer and encourage the faithful. They will suffer persecution, "but not a hair of your head will perish." By their endurance they will gain their lives. Terrifying things will be upon the earth, and faithless men will faint with fear and foreboding. But "when these things begin to take place, look up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near." The holy Gospel contains the New Testament message of hope and is to impress on us our great duty to prepare for the final advent.

The Proper Preface. "Whose way John the Baptist prepared, proclaiming Him the Messiah, the very Lamb of God, and calling sinners to repentance that they might escape from the wrath to be revealed when He cometh again in glory."

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE EPISTLE

The Old Testament a Book of Hope

A. Christ came to fulfill all the hopes of the Jews, "to confirm the promises given the patriarchs," and to set His seal on all the promises of the Old Testament. "A servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness," with a special mission to the Jews. They hoped for the Messiah, and Christ came to show that this hope was not mistaken. As Prophet, Priest, and King He fulfilled all that God had promised.

B. A Book of hope for the Gentiles. Many promises to the Gentiles were scattered through the Old Testament. Christ came to fulfill these and open the kingdom of heaven to all believers. These promises are apparently alien to Jewish exclusiveness, yet necessary to prepare the way for the rule of the Root of Jesse.

C. A Book of hope for us. The Old Testament still has a message of hope. In our own trials and difficulties we may turn to the example of those who in darker days remained faithful to the God of hope and were not disappointed, and may draw lessons of patience and comfort. First patience, then comfort, then hope, and finally something higher still, "joy and peace in believing." St. Paul also refers to the mode of remaining steadfast and strong: harmony with one another.

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE HOLY GOSPEL

A New Testament Message of Hope

A. A world in despair. Without Christ the course of this world is without hope. There will be distress, perplexity, fear, and foreboding. All who have not learned to love Christ will always dread His appearing.

B. The Christian hope. That which will make unbelievers fear will inspire the believer with eager hope. He will look up and raise his head in eager, joyful expectation as he sees redemption drawing near. He will know that the storms sweeping over the world are the gales that usher in the spring and summertime of God's kingdom and the perfect sunshine of Christ's presence.

C. The certainty of the Christian hope. It is as sure as the sure Word of Christ. All else shall pass away, but Christ's words never.

Each generation shall find them true. The Bible is a Book of calm confidence. It sees the worst and yet assures of the best, looking toward the Kingdom that cannot be shaken, full of faith in Him who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever." From cover to cover the Bible is a Book of hope and the Book of the God of hope.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The Lord's Supper assumes unusual significance on this day. The words of the Preface "when He cometh again in glory" once more bring to mind the day's lesson regarding the second advent. We remember that when on Maundy Thursday our Lord sat at table, and the apostles with Him, He said: "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer, for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." He took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He said: "Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." The church never forgot that as her Lord said farewell in the Upper Room He looked longingly down the centuries to the moment when He would visibly be with His beloved at His second advent. The thought of His return must have been uppermost in His mind that night, for all four accounts of the Institution bring some reference to it. St. Paul wrote that by eating and drinking "you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes." That the last banquet of the Son of God on earth should be connected with the Messianic banquet in heaven was inevitable. The first liturgical prayer the worshiping church addressed to her exalted Christ was: "Come, Lord Jesus!" In the earliest Liturgy the celebrant says, "May Grace come and this world pass away." With "Grace" is meant the Lord Jesus. The congregation responds, "Hosanna to the God of David." Again the celebrant, "If any be holy, let him come; if he be not, let him repent. Maranatha!" The Lord is coming. If any is a baptized believer, let him come to Holy Communion with his Lord. If not, let him first become a Christian. The Lord is coming, here in the holy Sacrament and again at the end of the world.

Down the ages the church has always connected the invisible coming in Holy Communion with the visible advent in glory, the Supper in the Upper Room with the great marriage supper in

heaven, the coming to His bride in the holy Sacrament with the coming of the Bridegroom to take her home. The Lord's Supper bridges the time between our Lord's days on earth and His return in glory. At His Table we enter upon timelessness. Time and eternity meet. The thoughts of the communicant move between two high points, the Last Supper on earth and the first and eternal supper in the kingdom of God. Just where along the way between these two points he happens to commune with his Lord in the holy Sacrament is of no consequence. Every celebration is a repetition of the first and an anticipation of the last.

The Lord's Supper is the bread of Pilgrims, the sustenance on the way through this world to the kingdom of God, the sustaining, strengthening food on the way from time to eternity, from here to yonder. The believers eat as Israel ate the Passover in Egypt, girded and ready, ate and hurried away. Elijah found food under the broom tree, "ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God." So the believer eats and drinks food prepared by God in the holy Sacrament and is strengthened on his journey to the Mount of God.

In the celebration we lift our hearts far above this poor earth to the throne of Him who died and lives for evermore. Yes, Christ will come to us according to His promise. He is present in heaven, and before Him all angels and saints sing praises. We lift our hearts unto the Lord and join the heavenly choir in the hymn that came to us from heaven, "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of the angels! Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory." Enraptured, the pilgrims find themselves in the heavenly company. The Lord Jesus comes in His Word of promise, communes with them, unites Himself with them, to live in and with them. He companies with them once more. Soon He will come to take them home. Yes, He will come! Even now His presence is not a matter of distance but only of seeing what the eyes of faith always behold.

So the faithful pilgrims celebrate the Lord's death. So they keep alive and strengthen the hope that is in them. So they join the saints of all ages in the prayer of unshakable hope, "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus! Maranatha!" and proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

The Lord is at hand! Prepare for His coming! We cannot prepare for His first advent, as this lies in the past. But the commemoration of the Nativity forcefully reminds us that there is a constant coming and a future coming. For these we are to prepare. At the first coming St. John prepared the way. The Lord still has His messengers who are to prepare the faithful for a blessed commemoration of the first advent, for the constant coming in Word and Sacrament, and for the coming in power and glory. They are the ministers of Christ. The Propers for this day direct attention to them and call upon the faithful to examine their attitude toward Christ's messengers and their message.

The Introit. "Rejoice in the Lord always; and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. Lord, Thou hast been favorable unto Thy land; Thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob."

The Antiphon is from the New Testament, which is extremely rare. God has kept His promise, the waiting is over, the voice of the Forerunner is heard at last. Therefore prepare with gladness, rejoice in the Lord always, for He is at hand. But joy is not to be unrestrained. The realization of the blessing in that coming, in that fulfillment, is best found in quiet, holy contemplation. Let your gentleness be known to all men, in the joy of gratitude and adoring worship, in prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. The Lord has not forgotten. He has fulfilled His promise. The Lord is at hand. Thou hast been favorable unto Thy land, Thou didst restore the fortunes of Jacob.

The Collect. "Lord, we beseech Thee, give ear to our prayers, and lighten the darkness of our hearts by Thy gracious visitation."

In the holy Gospel for this day, our Lord says of St. John that he was His messenger, preparing the way before Him. In the first chapter of St. John's Gospel it is said that the Forerunner came to bear witness of the Light. He was not the Light, but the messenger of preparation, the merest ray before the Dayspring who was to arise and give light, to be the Light of the world. In preparation

for the advent we pray that by Christ's gracious visitation the darkness of our hearts may be dispelled and the Light shine in the darkness.

The Epistle, 1 Cor. 4:1-5. St. John was the preacher of preparation. The King who is coming again still has His preachers of preparation, the ministers of Christ, the stewards of the mysteries of God. They are to "go and show" again the things they hear and see. To prepare God's people for Christ's constant and future coming, they must themselves lead by their example. They rejoice in the Lord always, because He has come, is coming, will come. "The Lord is at hand." Their forbearance is to be known to all men. Carefree but prayerful and thankful they go before Him. They have ever before them the Herald's example. Ministers of Christ, stewards of God's mysteries. They are to be faithful, trustworthy. They are to learn, as did the Forerunner, what it means to fight through the trials of this life, the testing of faith, the judgment of men, the suffering for righteousness' sake. They are to face the perils of being "offended in Me" and learn the blessedness of clinging to Him through all.

The Gradual. "Thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth. Stir up Thy strength and come. Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, Thou that ledest Joseph like a flock. Alleluia! Alleluia! Stir up Thy strength, and come and save us. Alleluia!"

The words are from the opening verses of Psalm 80. See the Psalm Verse of the Introit for the Second Sunday in Advent. The Collect for this day speaks of lighting the darkness of our hearts, the Gradual of shining forth.

The Proper Sentence. "Alleluia! Remember, O Lord, Thy tender mercies; for they have been ever of old. Alleluia!"

The Gospel, Matt. 11:2-10. Through her ministry the church endeavors to prepare her children for the advent. She did wisely when she introduced that stern preacher, St. John the Baptist, at this point. This is the second Sunday before Christmas, and there is danger that from here on our preparation consist largely in working ourselves into an emotional, sentimental state about a poor Babe born in a stable. It is well to be reminded that Christmas means more than gushing over a touching story or indulging in a spree of unselfish giving. We need to have the voice in the wilder-

ness cry to us, "Make straight in the desert a highway for your God!" God is coming. Prepare His way into your hearts and lives, for it is here that He would enter and rule. The unbelieving world around us waxes sentimental over the poor Babe because it knows nothing of and cares less for, the spiritual aspects of Christmas. "Blessed is he who takes no offense at Me."

What are we to prepare for? The mere commemoration of the birth of Jesus is not an experience but a recalling of a historical event. "Go and tell what you see and hear," is for us. What shall we hear and see? The prophets tell us what we may expect. "The afflicted (or poor) shall eat and be satisfied" (Ps. 22:26). "The deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see" (Is. 29:18). "The Lord has anointed Me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound . . . to comfort all who mourn" (Is. 61:1, 2).

What do we see and hear? The spiritually poor, afflicted by guilt feelings, mourning over their sins, shall be satisfied. The thought of sin is not out of place as we prepare to go to Bethlehem. The Child in the manger can mean nothing to us unless we come with the words ringing in our hearts, "Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for He shall save His people from their sins." Thank God if you come to Bethlehem with guilt feelings. You may leave them there and go away without them. "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world." In Bethlehem God enters our human life as a true man to cancel all sin and to take all guilt upon Himself. Peace, the peace between God and man, is accomplished in Bethlehem. Men are again the objects of God's good will. In and through the Christ Child God has established a contract and bound Himself to forgive all and every sin. "Go and tell." The world asks, "Art Thou He, or look we for another?" The church answers with her testimony and tells of what she has seen and heard. Her experience carries proof and conviction.

The Proper Preface. "Whose way John the Baptist prepared, proclaiming Him the Messiah, the very Lamb of God, and calling sinners to repentance that they might escape from the wrath to be revealed when He cometh again in glory."

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE EPISTLE

The Dignity and Responsibility of the Ministerial Office

A. In relation to Christ, pastors are ministers. They are not their own masters but the servants of the King. They are sent to do His business in the world, not their own. To Him alone they are responsible. They are not ministers of congregations, but ministers of Christ, and of men for Christ's sake. This truth rebukes alike those who unduly magnify or unduly depreciate. The pastor is only a minister, not to be thought of beyond his due; but he is Christ's minister, and not to be despised.

B. In relation to other Christians and God's people, pastors are stewards. The treasure they are called to disperse is not their own. The pardon they announce, the Gospel they preach, the Sacraments they administer are effective only by Christ's commission and authority. Only their faults are their own, and for these they are responsible to Christ alone. What matter who condemns if Christ approves? or who approves if Christ condemns? Faithfulness, trustworthiness, is the only duty of stewards, and of this their Master is the one Judge. It is their duty to keep their conscience clear, not aware of anything against themselves, but the final arbiter is not conscience but Christ. "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes." The work of the pastor is not only to prepare others for Christ's advent, but to be prepared himself, to heed his own message.

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE HOLY GOSPEL

The Trustworthy Servant and His Faithful Master

A. The trustworthy minister. St. John was such a faithful minister. His faithfulness to duty had caused him to be in prison, and finally cost him his life. Condemned to inactivity, this eager servant became impatient when he heard of the quiet, peaceful manner in which his Master was establishing the Kingdom. Things were not going as he had imagined. To rouse the Lord to greater aggressiveness, he sent a message implying that it was high time to get things under way. The threshing floor was to be cleared, the chaff burned with unquenchable fire. This shows that the strongest are at times weak, the brightest faith clouded, and the

most earnest and sincere have their dark times of apparent failure and discouragement.

B. The faithful Master. Our Lord's treatment of St. John is a strong encouragement to His ministers. (1) As an example of patience. Tell John again just what is happening. Am I not doing what I must do according to God's plan as revealed by the prophets? I am doing the deeds expected of Me. Christ will be judged by His deeds. This will ever be the best answer to those who doubt our sincerity. Then the gentle reproof, "Blessed is he who takes no offense at Me." The blessedness of faith is its best argument, and the misery of doubt its own condemnation. Very foolish are the stumbling blocks over which some allow themselves to stumble, e. g., the imperfection of the church and the faults of Christians.

(2) As an example of generosity. Our Lord refrained from blame, and He lavished praise. He will ever praise in His ministers the same qualities He found to praise in His forerunner. He will praise their firm steadfastness. He would not have them "as reeds shaken in the wind" of popularity or unpopularity. He will praise their self-denial. He would not have His ministers men of self-indulgence and soft luxury. He will praise the true prophet who declares His will, and the true messenger who prepares His way. He would have all His ministers true John Baptists. Being that, they may rely on His faithfulness.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

On this Sunday the church witnesses that the Man of Nazareth who healed the blind, the lame, the lepers, the deaf, who raised the dead and preached good news to the poor, is indeed He who was to come, the Savior. She invites her children to confess and proclaim their faith in Him and His salvation by eating His body and drinking His blood together with the bread and wine. By eating and drinking to His memorial the believer declares that the Redeemer came to save him, that this body was given and this blood shed to purchase for him the forgiveness of his sins and all the heavenly treasures that are his because all his sins are forgiven and he is at peace with his heavenly Father. By drinking of the cup of the New Covenant he becomes a party to that covenant and has forgiveness, life, and blessedness.

However, as a party to the covenant, the believer has definite obligations. Christ is his King, who has bought him with a price to be His own, to live under Him in His kingdom. As he now proclaims the death for Him, as he enters anew into the covenant, he declares that he welcomes his King as an obedient subject. He is done with the service of sin and self. In his life he will tell out what he has seen and heard, that he has found Christ a loving, glorious Lord and King, whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light.

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN ADVENT

The ancient church called this last Sunday before the Holy Nativity the Preparation. The Propers reflect the eager expectation of the faithful. "Let the earth open and bring forth salvation!" "Stir up Thy power and come!" "The Lord is at hand!" "The Lord is nigh!" "There standeth one among you." From the preparation by the Bible and by the church we are led to the yet deeper truth of preparation by Christ Himself. The inward and spiritual presence of Christ is needed if we are to be ready for the commemoration of His outward and visible coming.

The Introit. "Drop down, ye heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness. Let the earth open and bring forth salvation. The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth His handiwork."

The Revised Standard Version translates Is. 45:8: "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may sprout forth, and let it cause righteousness to spring up also." The psalm reads: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims His handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). When the Christ Child came, God showered His love upon the world. The heavens opened, and a multitude of the heavenly host told the glory of God. But the Introit reaches far beyond the Feast of the Nativity to Golgotha, where salvation sprouted fourth from the earth. In Bethlehem the Tree of Life was planted. The Lord is at hand. Make ready for the planting. The heavens are about to open and tell the glory of God.

The Collect. "Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee, Thy power and come, and with great might succor us, that by the help of Thy

grace whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished through Thy mercy and satisfaction, who livest and reignest with the Father and the Holy Ghost, ever one God, world without end."

This prayer is addressed to the Son, in harmony with the thought of this day, "Preparation by Christ for Christ." His unseen presence and power, His inward advent, prepare us for His outward coming.

The Epistle, Phil. 4:4-7, adds the great Advent cry, "The Lord is at hand," and teaches the true preparation. We are ready when our hearts are full of joy, our lives reveal moderation and gentleness, our mouths are filled with prayer and thanksgiving, our souls possessed of the peace of God. "To Bethlehem hasten to worship the Lord."

The Gradual. "The Lord is nigh unto all them that call upon Him, to all that call upon Him in truth. My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord, and let all flesh bless His holy name. Alleluia! Alleluia! Thou art my Help and my Deliverer; make no tarrying, O my God! Alleluia!"

The presence of Christ is the source of all preparedness. True preparedness is within our reach, for the Lord is near to all that call upon Him in truth. We shall not be disappointed. We, too, shall praise Him for being our Help and Deliverer.

The Proper Sentence. "Alleluia! Remember, O Lord, Thy tender mercies; for they have been ever of old. Alleluia!"

The Gospel, John 1:19-28. We see the Herald in action, preparing the earth for the great event. His purpose is to direct attention away from himself to Christ. "This is the testimony of John . . . He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed . . . 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.'" He is here. He stands among you. This testimony strikingly illustrated that Christ alone can prepare us for His advent.

The Proper Preface. "Whose way John the Baptist prepared, proclaiming Him the Messiah, the very Lamb of God, and calling sinners to repentance that they might escape from the wrath to be revealed when He cometh again in glory."

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE EPISTLE

The Realization of Christ's Presence

A. The source of joy. The importance of Christian joy is indicated by St. Paul's double command, "Rejoice, and again I say, Rejoice." Its possibility lies in the words "in the Lord," for only in the service of Christ and in connection with Christ can we be glad in a world of so much sorrow. In union with Christ the believer gains the joy of Christ in the unbroken consciousness of divine love.

B. The source of forbearance or gentleness. What the Authorized Version translates with "moderation" is gentleness in spirit and temper. It is enforced by the nearness of Christ's advent. This will make us yielding as to our personal rights, for the end is so near when all things shall lose their value; patient under insults and annoyances, all so soon to be forgotten; gentle in the expression of opinion, for He is so near who knows all things perfectly and will prove us all to be more or less mistaken; ready to resign the world's joys, ambitions, gains, and engagements, for when He arrives, all this poor world will vanish. This argument may well make us gentle and yielding in spirit, since He is coming who was the very King and Prince of gentleness. Let us hold nothing very tight except the Gospel, Christian truth, and moral principles. Let us be ready to drop all that is ours, so that we may hold fast all that is Christ's; ready to drop earth that we may better grasp heaven.

C. The source of freedom from care. If Christ is at hand to reverse our hasty judgments, He is at hand to hear our prayers. In such a presence anxiety is a sin and altogether unchristian. The Epistle contains a prescription and a promise.

The prescription is prayer. "Let your requests be made known to God." This is a universal prescription applying to everything, for nothing is too large or too small to bring to God. Prayer covers all we desire, supplication all we fear. The prescription includes thanksgiving, for God will give little to those who seem to think that He has given them nothing.

The promise is peace. God bestows the peace that comes from prayer, and it is like Him who bestows it, "the peace of God which

passes all understanding." It shall dwell in the heart and hold its own, like a garrison keeping all enemies away. This peace the heart can feel, the mind accept, and it comes in and through Christ and Christ alone. From Him comes peace with God and the peace of God. The source of all these benefits is the presence of our Lord. Our joy is "in the Lord," our gentleness flows from the knowledge "the Lord is at hand," and our peace is "through and in Christ Jesus."

OUTLINE FOR SERMON ON THE HOLY GOSPEL

The Herald's Confession of Inferiority

A. His inferiority in dignity. In three humble negatives he disclaims all distinction. With great emphasis he repudiates the very thought that he is the Messiah for whose advent he was to prepare. No words can be stronger. "He confessed, he did not deny, but confessed, I am not the Christ." The prophet Malachi had spoken for God, "Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible Day of the Lord comes." St. John in very truth was this Elijah, yet he did not advance for himself so high a claim. Our Lord said of him that he was a prophet and more than a prophet, yet St. John could see in himself no resemblance whatever to a prophet. Such humility is a true mark of those best fitted to prepare others for Christ. They stand aside and let Him pass. If He alone can do this work, they must of necessity be humble.

B. His inferiority in office. He thinks of himself not as a speaker but as a voice, not as a messenger but as a message. He regards his Baptism as merely preparatory, there is need for a more perfect cleansing. He looks upon himself as unworthy to perform the service of a slave to the coming Master. His work was the humble duty of preparation, and the need for even that had passed, for the Christ was standing among them though they knew it not, His own final message was about to be delivered, "Behold the Lamb of God!"

Christ stands among you! This is the last message of the church before the great day of His coming. By His unseen presence alone can we be prepared to celebrate His first advent or to welcome the second advent. All personal effort, all use of the means of grace provided in the church are effectual only in so far as we cling to the personal Savior.

THE HOLY COMMUNION

The realization of Christ's presence is the source of Christmas joy. We say that we visit the manger of Christ in spirit to rejoice. We give the appearance that Christmas is a joyous occasion. Is our joy genuine? Over what do we rejoice? Surely we have progressed beyond the point where the Nativity means only that since Christ came to die for us we need not go to hell. Is there nothing positive? Christmas means that we who were separated from God now have Him with us. It means God present on earth, among us, in us. God is here!

To tell us that God is with us, the heavens open in Bethlehem and the glory of heaven streams forth upon the earth. God comes to earth and opens the gates of Paradise once more. They stand open ever since! "He opens us again the door of Paradise today." Heaven is the presence of God, and heaven has come to earth. Christmas means that God is present among men, to be worshiped on bended knee as He is adored in heaven. Christmas means that God companies with men and communes with sinners. Christmas means that we are traveling toward the open gates of home into the presence of God. We are to spend eternity worshiping and adoring Him, in having sweet communion and fellowship with our Lord and King.

Do we truly rejoice over the prospect of spending eternity in heaven with God? Will our joy in Bethlehem be genuine? How much of our singing is merely the mouthing of pious and sentimental phrases? Heaven is the presence of God. Our sole occupation will be to adore and admire and worship, to have communion and fellowship with Christ. Have we a taste for this sort of thing? Shall we enjoy an eternity of worshiping God and communing with Christ? Is God attractive enough for us to rejoice over the prospect of admiring Him and having fellowship with Him eternally?

Many who in some manner celebrate Christmas, are bored at the prospect of heaven. There is nothing to look forward to if we have no taste for worship and find no delight in fellowship with Christ. If communion with Christ is really a delight, we shall not haggle and bargain as to how much of it we must do in this life. We shall not question whether or not we must worship and have fellowship at every opportunity. There will be nothing more de-

lightful and pleasant than to come into God's presence and worship. We shall not receive Holy Communion only occasionally, when the calendar tells us that custom requires that we commune again. Worship, adoration, communion will not be an unpleasant, dreary chore.

Truly to rejoice in Bethlehem, we must rejoice that God comes to us and is present with us. To rejoice over His presence means that we delight in fellowship with Him. Christmas means that we have a taste for such occupations. It means that the word "must" disappears from our religious life. We no longer ask how often we must do this or that, but we look forward to the next opportunity to do something we thoroughly enjoy. Christ comes and is present in a special way whenever the faithful gather for worship. The faithful have blessed fellowship with Him at His Table.

If this approach to Bethlehem upsets our religious routine and disturbs our pattern, if it seems as revolutionary as the Baptist's message seemed to his contemporaries, if it means adjustments in our thinking and habits, there is no cause for alarm. All it means is that we shall spend a profitable Christmas in Bethlehem. Christmas brought something new into the world. Why should it not bring something new into our lives and our formal religion?

May we, then, on this Sunday of the Preparation rejoice in the Lord and His presence. He comes to us this day in His holy Sacrament. May Christ stir up His power and come, that whatsoever is hindered by our sins may be speedily accomplished. The Lord is at hand. Salvation has sprouted forth. This we commemorate. The body given for us. The blood shed for the remission of our sins. There stands One among us. Receive and welcome Him into a loving, believing heart.

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