

The First Sunday of Advent • November 27, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

"Imminent"

Let's keep it simple today. It's now the Advent season and the start of a new year on the church calendar. Just last week, we celebrated Christ the King Sunday, which called us to remember that Jesus is our King who is coming again. In less than a month's time, we're going to be recalling Jesus' birth as we rejoice at Christmas. **Advent is a time in between.** Advent is not Christmas, yet it is still a season of hope and anticipation. We are waiting, yes, but we're not waiting for December 25 and everything that happens around that day. We're waiting for deliverance.

Advent is a time to call out with the prophet Isaiah, "Come, our Deliverer!" This is a season of expectation, looking ahead to the fulfillment of God's promise to redeem His people – and redemption is something that God's people need. Hear a brief bit of the historical context of Isaiah's message: the people are in exile in the land of Babylon, and they have been for generations. Some of the Hebrews who were born in exile have only heard tales passed down from their ancestors, tales that spoke of this promised land and the great city of Jerusalem. And yet the people longed for deliverance from captivity. In this Advent season, from what do you need delivering? What are the burdens that weigh down your heart and mind in this time in between? As God's people, we can lay those burdens at His feet and call out for His mercy, because we have heard that we have a God who acts for those who wait for Him. In this Advent season, we pray with Isaiah, asking for God's intercession, that He would step in *now* into our lives. We're not just looking for God to take action at some far-flung point in the future, but in the here-and-now. That's what we're asking when we come together and pray the prayer that Jesus taught us – the Lord's Prayer – saying, "thy will be done." Come, our Deliverer!

Advent is a time "in between." As we move from the end of one church year into the beginning of another, waiting for God's deliverance, St. Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians reminds us that we are people who live through God's grace. Our life of grace is a year-round thing; it's not bound by any one season. But in this time in between, we especially remember that grace and peace that we have from God our Father, in His Son. It is a central theme of Advent. **You are a people of grace and peace!** As we wait in this time in between, and we need the grace and peace that God brings us in Jesus. Waiting challenges us in our weakness. All too often, we lose that connection between believing and doing what we believe. I believe that Jesus will return, and could at any time – but I don't always live out that faith. **What about you?** Mercifully, God strengthens us in our weakness through the gifts that He gives. He gathers us around the cross of Christ and delivers forgiveness and hope through word and sacrament. He draws us in, bringing us closer to Him. In Advent, in this time in between, Christ sustains us, and he sustains us to the end!

Advent is a time that reminds us that the Savior's return is imminent. (This is "imminent" with an "i", not an "e!") The imminent is that which is about to happen, likely to occur at any moment. It's coming soon! In our Gospel text from Mark, Jesus is speaking of the end. But didn't we just hear about that at the end of the church year, with Christ the King Sunday and those weeks leading up to it? Yes. But we need to hear it again at the beginning of the church year, as it is the point of the church year: Jesus is coming to redeem. He is the center, in every season. "He is at near, at the very gates." Jesus, in speaking to his disciples and those who had gathered to hear him, is talking in "now/not yet" terms. Indeed, the things that he described would come to pass and be seen by that generation, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 AD. But he was also pointing ahead to his return. In this time in between, he has given us his word to be with us even as we wait for his imminent return in power and majesty. His word remains, even though heaven and earth should pass away. And so, we cling to that word, heeding Jesus' instruction to "be on guard, keep

awake.” Literally translated, being on guard is “keeping your eyes open.” In Advent, as you wait, it can be a challenge to keep your eyes open. We struggle with keeping the reason for this season front and center. Our momentum dissipates. We lose focus. So what might we do? Let’s keep it simple today.

Advent is a time for keeping it simple. You’ve seen the Christmas decorations going up – even two weeks ago, workers were stringing garlands around lampposts in mall parking lots. And now that Thanksgiving has passed, the shopping season is in full swing. The floodgates have come open! Did you head out to shop on “Black Friday” with the crowds? People waited in lines hundreds of people long, eagerly anticipating the deals that they would find once the appointed hour arrived and they could enter into the stores. I didn’t go shopping on Friday, but I must admit that I did watch the little countdown timers on Amazon.com to see what kind of deals they’d be offering. The countdown was exciting. As Christians in America, many of you might practice the tradition of using an Advent calendar. My mom made copies of the calendar that we’d had growing up for my brother and me. It’s a flat, wooden Christmas tree, and each day you’d hang an ornament on it, representing something for which we’re thankful, counting down the days to December 25. **What if the Advent calendar was the only decoration in your home this season?** Imagine: no Christmas tree, no stocking on the mantle, no garlands, no little candles in the windows. Scandalous! **And what if the Advent calendar was counting down the days until your Lord’s return?** How would you prepare, knowing that every day was a day closer to you being with Jesus? Jesus’ return is indeed imminent, though it be in God’s timing, if not yours and mine. Our God who created and sustains the universe is outside of time, and to Him a thousand years are but as a day. His *is* coming soon.

So let’s keep it simple today. With Isaiah, call out to God – the God who acts for those who wait for Him – asking for the one who will bring the deliverance that we need. With Paul, remember the life of grace that we live in the strength that God gives us year-round. With Mark, think upon our Lord’s imminent return, keeping your eyes open in hope and joyous expectation. **Advent is a time in between**, but it does not last forever. Our King is coming, and he is coming soon. Welcome to Advent!

Amen.