

Grace to you and peace from the one who is, who was, and who is to come.

Well here we go around again. It's a new church year, beginning today. Happy New Year! Today we begin the season Advent, which I think it's fair to say is my favorite season of the church year. There something about this time of year as we move into the darkest time of the calendar year that is at once gloomy and yet hopeful. At least that's how I've often experienced it. Advent an understated season, one that a lot of people don't even know exists – even our fellow Christians. In my first couple of years as pastor down in Carbondale I made point of publicizing our Advent services, both on Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings, in our newspaper ads, at a time when most other churches were advertising their Christmas activities. After the second time of doing that, I was asked by the religion editor of the newspaper to write a piece explaining what Advent was and why we celebrated it, because he at least was not familiar with it. Advent is not flashy. It is not a season of overwhelming joy like the Easter season, or the short Christmas season that will soon be upon us. It's not a season of penitence like the season of Lent, although it has sometimes been treated that way in the past. It is a season of quiet hopefulness and anticipation.

In the past couple of weeks there's been a discussion about Advent in one of the Facebook groups that Lutheran pastors hang out in. This was discussion was sparked by and article that someone posted written by a retired seminary professor. The article suggested that the new lectionary, which is at least twenty years old now, places too much emphasis on *our* preparation for Christ's coming and not enough on the *promise* of his coming. The claim was that we end up focusing too much on what *we* are supposed to be doing and not enough on what *God* is doing. This trend is reflected also in some of our newer hymns, according to this professor. A case in point was the hymn People Look East, which the choir is singing for the anthem at the 10:30 service next Sunday. It's hymn number 248 in your hymnal, if you want to have a look. The focus in the first two verses is definitely on actions that we might take – “make your house fair as you are able, trim the hearth and set the table,” and then in v. 2, “give up your strength the seed to nourish that in course the flow'r may flourish.” So I took the author's point. Advent really should be about focusing on what God does for us rather than on what we do for God. That's a basic Lutheran principle that's hard to argue with. But as I thought about it over the next few weeks, and as we continued to sing the hymn in choir practice, I started to change my mind – not that that our focus *shouldn't* be on what God is doing, but that this hymn is all about what we do. Each verse ends by reminding us that “Love ... is on the way.” And presumably Love is coming whether we're prepared or not, wouldn't you say? But the final verse is the one that clinched it for me, and one that Jon wants the choir to really emphasize. “Set every peak and valley humming with the word, the Lord is coming.” Do we have something to do in Advent? We absolutely do. Announce the good news of God's coming among us as one of us in Jesus Christ for us and for our salvation. Which is what the church is always supposed to be about.

Today's readings are all about the good news of what God promises to do for us, and I want to focus especially on the gospel reading from Luke, which can be read either as a scary end-times text, or as a promising, hopeful end-times text. I want to encourage us to read it as the latter. In this text Jesus tells his disciples, and by extension, you and me, what to expect and what to do. He's giving them and us advanced warning. Why? I think it surely must be so that we can

be prepared. Otherwise, why tell us? Why not just come back riding on a cloud and leave it at that? But that preparation has everything to do with reminding us not of what we need to do for God, but what God is doing and will do for us in Jesus Christ.

I think there are three quick takeaways for us in this Gospel reading today. The first is that we should expect Christ's return. He doesn't want us to be surprised. He wants us to count on the promise that the world as it is is not the world as it was meant to be, or as it always will be. As I've said before, whether that strikes you as good news or not depends very much on who you are. If you like the world as it is, if it's working for you right now, you might not want it to change. But if you are like most people, oppressed by sin, death, and the power of evil, then Christ's defeat of those powers and the coming of God's kingdom will strike you as very good news indeed.

The second takeaway here is that we don't have to worry about whether the end is near, or already beginning now. The disciples in the gospel reading two Sundays ago wanted to know when all these end-time things would happen. And Jesus told them they don't need to know that. Maybe because he didn't know himself, which he tells them later in that same chapter. What Jesus is saying in our text today is, "Don't worry, when it happens, you'll know. It will be super obvious."

The third takeaway is that all of this end-times stuff really is good news, whether it strikes you that way the moment or not. When these things happen, these things that you can't miss, these things that will be super obvious, take heart! Stand up and raise your heads," says Jesus, "because your redemption is drawing near."

So once again, Jesus want us to expect his return and not give up on his promise, even though it's been two thousand years and he seemed to indicate that it would be a lot sooner. Jesus want us to expect his return, to not get distracted or worried about when it will happen, and to count on the fact that the end that God is bringing about is a good thing for us.

Advent then is about focusing on what God has done, is doing, and will continue to do for us in Jesus Christ. And it is precisely that focus that is our preparation for his coming. It's not an either/or. It's a both/and. God is working on our behalf in Jesus and we are invited and empowered to respond. So may God grant us grace be faithful in this Advent season to the central task that the church always has throughout the church year and throughout the history of the church, the task of proclaiming God's love and reconciliation in Jesus Christ, the one who has come, who has died and been risen, and who will come again. May we be faithful to that task and trust in that promise. And may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.