

**The First Sunday in Advent, November 28, 2021**

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

**Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and a Donkey**

Luke 19:28–40

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

*Eph 1:2*


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From our Gospel reading: **They brought the [colt] to Jesus, and throwing their cloaks on the colt, they set [Him] on it, and the multitude said, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”** (vv 35, 38).

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## I.

Before the turkey and stuffing are even digested, the world has moved on. Thanksgiving? That’s so last week. Put that stuff on the sale rack. Now it’s time to prepare for Christmas. We’re told to get ready because it’ll be here before we know it—only twenty-seven days left. Better wrap the gifts, frost the cookies, and trim the tree. Oh, and remember to deck the halls while you’re at it. No one wants to be caught unprepared. So we begins the most frenzied season of the year.

But what are we getting ready for? Why all these preparations, all this hustle-and-bustle and stress? Is it because Santa’s coming to town and he must have three shopping carts filled with gifts for the grandkids? Is it because the children will finally be home or the in-laws will be visiting? Is it because all the neighbors rave about your annual Christmas party and your famous eggnog? That may be why the world prepares, and that may be what it prepares for, but that’s not why the church prepares.

Thanksgiving is past. The church has turned her calendar too, and she even wears new colors. But it’s not for a generic “holiday season” or to mark the shopping season. The church observes Advent. Advent means “coming” or “arrival” or “appearance.” While the world prepares to give gifts, throw parties, and host guests—and those things are good and have their place—the Church has a different preparation:

ADVENT PREPARES US TO MEET GOD.

Advent prepares us to meet God if we’re not too distracted by all the other preparations. He can easily get lost amidst the wrapping paper, Christmas cards, and sugar cookies. So don’t let this “holiday season” steal your Advent. Don’t let it leave you unprepared to meet your God.

## II.

Now, if we're to meet God, then it would be good to know a little bit about Him. Who is He and what's He like? The Church doesn't do blind dates. The entire Old Testament, the prophets, and these Sundays in Advent, are the matchmaker. They give us a profile of our God, an idea of what to expect. And this is what today, the first Sunday in Advent, tells us: God rides a donkey. Say what? Yes, your God comes on a donkey. Not quite what you had in mind for meeting God, is it? It seems a bit unbecoming, undignified, un-God-like. Yet the prophet Zechariah proclaims "Behold, your King comes," the great bridegroom of the Church, and out saunters a Jewish man on an unbroken colt. I'm not sure what that does to the holiday spirit. Hey Zechariah, that's not the match we wanted. Perhaps there's been some mistake? Could you find another god for us?

The Greek and Roman gods would never do that. Can you imagine Zeus or Jupiter or Mars saddling up a donkey and trotting into town? At the very least, they'd find an impressive steed or a charger. In fact, the myths describe Zeus as riding in a chariot drawn by immortal horses. The winged-horse Pegasus was said to carry his thunderbolts. Now there's a god you can respect—strong and warlike. You won't want to mess with him.

The God that Luke gives us, the one riding on a donkey, seems like no match for the gods of Greece and Rome. How strangely He behaves! But then again, this God isn't like other gods. He's gentle and lowly of heart. His yoke is easy. His burden is so light that a pack animal can bear it. What need does this God have of immortal horses and chariots? He created all things, and all things belong to Him. He can use any beast He wishes, including a lowly donkey if He so chooses. **"The Lord has need of it."** No further explanation is necessary. Surely this offers hope even to the lowliest, the most downtrodden, and the most stubborn among us. If He can redeem and use an untrained donkey for His purposes, then He can certainly save and sanctify you.

This God doesn't need to impress anyone; He's not an attention-seeking show off. He's more like a lover than a warrior, wooing His beloved rather than threatening and manipulating her. He weeps over her unfaithfulness, her sin, and the death that will come to her: **"Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace!"** For that is what He brings: peace, not war. As the multitude of His disciples proclaimed when He rode into Jerusalem, **"Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!"** Would we wish for a king, a god who fights for us? Those are a dime a dozen. Every king, every god does that. But

this God does so much more. Fight for us? No, rather He becomes one of us. He dies for us. He is the King of Peace, and He makes peace by shedding His blood.

That's why He goes to Jerusalem on a donkey. And it's why He starts in Bethlehem. That seems just as crazy. Really, in that little town? Among those miserable people? Why, they're nothing but a bunch of sinners. Yes, in Bethlehem, amid the smells and sounds and sights of first-century Bethlehem. In Bethlehem, God took on our human nature. In Jerusalem, God died for our sin. We forget Him; we ignore Him; we wish for a different God. And what does He do? He brings forgiveness. He offers peace.

### III.

How, then, do we prepare to meet a God like this, a God who will meet us sinners where we are? Prepare in this way: Confess that you, too, are a poor, pitiful sinner, full of love for yourself and lovelessness for others. Confess that you have forgotten Him in your focus on things of this world—for the things of this world would gladly consume us. Confess that the one thing for which you are truly unprepared is to meet Him. Confess that you are no better than the donkey He rode into Jerusalem, and no worse. And then confess the Creed: He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, crucified, died, and was buried. Why? Out of love for you. To redeem you, purchase and win you from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil. Because the mercy and steadfast love of the Lord have been from of old. Advent prepares us to meet God by confessing our sins and confessing our Savior.

Or think of like this: Advent is practice for meeting God when He comes again in glory. Right now you're in the middle of a full dress rehearsal—a rehearsal not for Living Nativity—a past event remembered now—but for Living Last Day—a future event coming soon. Before we meet God in eternity, we get to meet Him here. We meet here the same surprising God who was born in Bethlehem and who rode the donkey into Jerusalem. How? Today His body and blood ride bread and wine that He might enter into us with His peace and salvation. God is in bread and wine, and water, and English spoken by human tongues. Strange, isn't it? Un-god-like? Perhaps. Yet these are His instruments of salvation: unleavened bread, purchased wine, tap water, and a man's mouth, for He has put His word in them. He created them, and He can use them if He wants too, just as He could use a donkey. Created things aren't beneath Him if they can bring Him to you.

So this is how you meet your Maker: with the Lord's name placed on you in Baptism, with God's speech in your ears, and with God's body and blood on your tongues.

Advent prepares us to greet this God with the praise He deserves. We sing: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!” If we remain silent, the very stones would cry out. But, after everything else, that wouldn’t be so strange, would it? So Advent is preparation for eternity. We meet God now, in these ways, so that we can finally meet Him forever. He shows His grace to us now, so that we will know His grace also then. Advent prepares us to enter the heavenly Jerusalem with our donkey-riding, flesh-and-blood God. So instead of letting this “holiday season” rob you of Advent, let Advent prepare you to meet Jesus, your God.

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The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

*Phil 4:7*

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*Revised from a sermon preached at St. Paul’s Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana,  
for the First Sunday in Advent, November 29, 2009*