

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Advent 2
December 9, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
Here he comes

—Philippians 1:3-11

Here it comes. Are you ready? Christmas is coming in a little over two weeks. Are you ready or are there still other preparations to be made? Some Preparations include shopping, sending out Christmas cards, getting the house ready for family. For some of our grade school students, preparations include learning your lines for the Children's Christmas service. For high school students or college students, there are exams that are standing in between you and Christmas break. Christmas is coming. That brings joy and excitement, but the days leading up to it are a time of much preparation.

The season of Advent, the season in the church year just prior to Christmas, is really of a season all about preparation. Certainly not the kind of preparation our world usually associates with the season. The preparation of Advent is not the frantic scramble to deck the halls and find the perfect gift because Christmas is coming. The preparation of Advent is an urgent call to prepare your heart because Christ is coming. That was the main message of John the Baptist. His voice called in the desert, "**Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.**" In other words, "Get ready, here he comes!" This too was the reminder the Apostle Paul had for the Philippian Christians decades after Christ had first come. Twice he mentions the **Day of Christ Jesus**, the day when Christ will come again. In other words, "Get ready, here he comes."

If we make such a big deal of getting ready because Christmas is coming, how much more will we want to prepare for Christ's coming? We know how to get ready for Christmas. But how do we get ready for Christ to come? Consider how John the Baptist prepared people for Christ's coming. He simply **preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**. "Here Christ comes, repent," was John's message. Here he comes. Recognize your sin and your inability to save yourself, and trust in Christ for forgiveness. That in a nutshell, was the essence of John's message. Decades later the Apostle Paul prepared his hearers for the coming of Christ with the very same message. Here we are today, the message hasn't changed. Here he comes. Get ready.

As we prepare our hearts for Christ's coming, why don't we start at his manger and remember his first coming. As you get ready for Christmas, do any of you set up a nativity in your home? We have number of nativities at our house, and some of them are kid friendly. But the problem we encounter over the years is that the little pieces can become misplaced. And do you know what the smallest piece of most nativities is? It's the baby Jesus. If he's not glued down to the manger or attached to Mary's arms, he's bound to go missing. Then I have my toddler asking me the deep question, "Where is Jesus?"

The manger scenes we set out at Advent are a reminder of the first time Christ came. And the tiny baby at the center of the manger is a reminder of just how Christ humbled himself at his first coming. Christ Jesus, who is God's own Son, came into the world and humbled himself by being born of a woman. He lived a perfect but humble life, not always taking full advantage of his divine power. He humbled himself to the point of death, even death on the cross. But then he rose. That was gospel that Paul first preached among the Philippians. That's the same gospel we first learned. Christ who has come to rescue us from sin is the central truth of God's word. This Advent, is the truth of Christ and his work at the center of your heart? Or is he like the little manger piece that easily gets lost in the shuffle? Is the importance of Jesus' work big deal, or do we minimize it because the activities and obligations right in front of us seem to be of bigger importance?

If so, hear the voice of John the Baptist calling, "Prepare the way for the Lord..." It's a call of repentance. Repentance requires humility, doesn't it? The Lord worked this repentance in John the Baptist when he said, "**He [Jesus] must become greater, I must become less.**" The Lord worked the same penitent attitude in the Apostle Paul who once wrote to Timothy, "**Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.**" As each of those men repented they didn't merely see themselves as less or the worst, but they saw Christ as greater, and as Savior. In true humility and repentance, we recognize the times we've made Christ too small because our egos were too big. We can confess with Paul, I am the worst of sinners. But then I see Christ who is greater than my sin. Then we see our Savior who saved even me. This is the message of repentance and forgiveness, which prepares our heart for Christ to come.

Christ has already come. Don't forget that. Christ will come again. Don't forget that either. What about now? So much of our Christian thinking is focused on what has already happened in the past (namely Christ has come to take away sin) and then the future (Christ will come to take us to be with him in heaven). But at times we

wonder about the now. Does it ever seem like Christ has left us in the world to fend for ourselves? Maybe we don't say it or think it so crassly, but we may act like it when we depend on ourselves. That's really what we do anytime we worry. When I worry I feel as though it's all up to me. And we even apply that thinking to our spiritual life. We might think that God got the whole ball rolling by sending Jesus to save us and by bringing us to faith, but now it depends on me to remain in God's favor. Then we either will think too highly of the things we do, thinking some how we are keeping ourselves in God's good graces. Or we begin to wonder, "Have I prayed enough? Have I gone to church enough? Have I done enough? Have I kept my faith?" And so in the meantime as we wait for Christ, at times we frantically worry, we hopelessly rely on ourselves.

If life as a Christian on this side of heaven were all about me just hanging in there by my own effort, well then I'd be doomed. But Paul shared this confidence with the Philippians, "**He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**" Let's prepare our hearts this Advent by repenting of our useless efforts and tireless self-reliance, and depend on Christ. Our God finishes what he starts. He doesn't just get the ball rolling and leave us to our own efforts. God sent his Son to live and die and rise for you. He sent his Spirit into your heart through baptism and through his spoken Word to create light in place of darkness, life in place of death. God continues to work to strengthen and sustain you until Christ comes again.

Christ hasn't left us hanging. Here Christ comes. Here through his word Christ comes to us even now. By his word he works true repentance in our hearts. With his law he levels all our self-righteousness to the ground; demolishes it. With his gospel he lifts us up from the valleys of despair and there he speaks to us with the good news that we stand in God's grace and favor through him. Here he comes through the waters of baptism to clothe us with his perfect life. Here he comes through bread and wine he visits us again with his true body and blood to forgive our sins and feed our faith. We prepare for Christ to come again as he comes to us through his Word and Sacraments. These aren't by any means useless old customs and passé promises. So let's not despise them as such. These are the means our God uses to cause his grace to come to us and preserve us for the day when Christ will come. This Advent, prepare your heart beside the quiet waters of Jesus' word, and at the font of your baptism, and your Lord's table. Here he comes in word and sacrament, to strengthen and sustain.

Finally, Christ will come again. Here he comes. Isn't it strange when this time of year we realize that Christmas is coming, it sort of puts us on edge. At times it's an overwhelming feeling of, "I'm not ready yet. There's still so much to do." It's not always a feeling of pure joy and peace, it's a bit of stress and restlessness. But rest this advent in the assurance that "**He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.**" It's not our tireless working and rushing around that truly prepares us. It's our gracious God who tirelessly works to prepare us and to preserve us until the day he comes.

And so this is my Advent prayer for you. It's the same prayer Paul had for the Philippians. I pray **that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight...** [that the love God poured into your life over flows more as you grow in knowledge and understanding of Christ.] **so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ,** [That you mature in your faith so that you can tell the difference between worthless empty things of this world and seek what good and pleases God until Christ comes again], and finally I pray as Paul did that you may be **filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ** [I pray that you remain connected to Jesus all the days of your life so that the fruits of your faith abound]—**to the glory and praise of God.** Amen.