

December 2, 2018 – 1st Sunday of Advent
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13; Luke 21:25-33

Coming Attractions

‘Tis the season... when there are a lot of new movies coming out in theaters. When you go to see a movie in a theater, you can also see what other movies are on the way, the previews, the coming attractions, the glimpses of future delights. I love previews.

‘Tis a new season in the church year. Already last week it was beginning to look a lot like Christmas... Snow and ice already?! But we’re not there yet. In church, before Christmas comes we have four weeks of previews, four weeks of preparation: the four weeks of Advent.

Advent is the season of the church year that anticipates Christ’s coming—at Christmas, for one. God comes to us at Christmas as a baby in a manger. God comes to us in a human being, born at a particular time, in a particular place. The gospel of Luke, chapter 2, the story that we always hear on Christmas Eve, makes a special point of these particulars. Luke 2 says that it happened when this particular person, the guy who was considered most important person of that time and place, the emperor—made a decree that everyone should be registered. This registration happened when this other guy was the governor of this other defined region. And so then this couple, who are named, and who were expecting a child, went, from one precise place to another, to the man’s hometown, of this name, because he was of this certain family. We hear these particulars recited every Christmas Eve. We hear them recited as a reminder that this is how God comes to us: in a temporal way, in a geographical, and genealogical way, in a vulnerable way, born as human beings are, helpless, born into all the conditions of human life, subject to and experiencing all its implications and consequences. The coming of Christ occurs in history. The coming of Christ occurs in time, we can ponder all the implications of that sentence: Christ comes to us in time, just in time, at the right time. This is probably the most familiar understanding of what is meant by the coming of Christ, which Advent has us thinking about—and this understanding makes a lot of sense, since that’s how the season ends, four weeks from now, with the celebration of Christmas.

But that’s not all there is to it. That’s not all that Advent anticipates. Advent is not just about an event that occurred two thousand years ago. The coming of Christ does not only refer to the birth of the babe at Bethlehem. There’s also what known as the second coming of Christ.

As it happens, the Bible has a lot more to say about this second coming, and how to prepare for it, than about how people got ready for Christ’s birth. If anyone threw a shower for Mary, we never hear about it. If she registered for gifts at Bethlehem Baby, the receipts have all been lost to history. There was no gender reveal party—unless you count the Annunciation, Gabriel’s dramatic surprise announcement. But when it comes right down to it, when it comes to accounts of what happened in the time when God was in utero, we have a grand total of one story—and it is a grand one, the story of how pregnant Mary went to see her cousin Elizabeth, who was also pregnant. We can remember how Elizabeth (an older mother, Elizabeth had a geriatric pregnancy, and she was significantly older than 35) we can remember how when pregnant Elizabeth saw Mary, the babe in Elizabeth’s womb leapt for joy (that babe would grow up to be John the Baptist, who leapt through life). And then Mary, also full of joy, started singing, a wondrous song, a song that became known as “The Magnificat,” “My soul magnifies the Lord... he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant... he has scattered the

proud... he has brought down the powerful ...” That song is a wonderful preview of what God does in Christ. But that’s about it, if you’re looking for baby Jesus in the belly stories. An account of Christ’s infancy can be found in only one book in the entire Bible, only in the gospel of Luke. Much, much more of scripture is about Jesus as adult: what he did when he came, and what that means, how that changed things, and will change things even more in the time to come.

So it is that many of our Advent readings are about Jesus’ second coming. We hear about this second coming from Jesus, as in the gospel reading today, which is from the end of Luke’s gospel. And we hear Jesus talk his second coming in other gospels, too, and in other books of the Bible. We hear about Jesus’ second coming in the epistles, the letters of the early church, which was certain that the second coming was imminent. First century Christians were constantly looking up, checking to see if Christ was descending in all his glory, raising their heads. And we also hear about Jesus’ second coming in the very last book of the New Testament, which our Adult Bible Study group is studying these weeks, the book of Revelation. Revelation is a strange, and often disturbing book, what with all its images and portents of what it will be like when Christ comes again. If those are the previews I’m not sure I want to see the movie. But it’s not just Revelation that says the second coming will be cataclysmic. It was right there in the gospel today, on the lips of Jesus, Christ telling us that before his second coming there will be distress among nations, and nature will be in turmoil, and people will faint from fear and foreboding. That does not sound all that grand. That does not sound all that different from what is happening today: nations in torment, nature in torment, the fear and foreboding about what the world is coming to.

To those who are in the midst of this, Christ says, “Raise your heads.” “Raise your heads, and know that your redemption is near.” Raise your heads, because these things will pass away: all the turmoil, all that torments you, all that causes us to tremor, it will all pass away.” That’s the promise of the second coming, and it is cataclysmic, the scope of this claim, it is news so good it is scary: The most horrible things we experience—and inflict—they’re all nothing compared to the power of God. Fear and despair and ennui do not have the final say. Lies and insults and indifference do not have the final say. Brutality and humiliation and shame do not have the final say. In the end, none of those things last. God’s word does. God’s promise does. God’s power does. God’s love does. God shows this, by stepping into time, and God will confirm it in cosmic fashion at the end of time.

And in the meantime, we have previews. You have seen previews. You have seen glimpses of what it’s like when God steps into time, you have seen glimpses of the glory yet to be revealed. You have seen it when two or three or more gather, in Christ’s name, to pray for one another and to praise God, to sing songs of wonder, even while the world is raging. You have seen glimpses of Christ coming when a child is welcomed—you have seen Christ being welcomed. You have seen it when a sick person is visited, or a hungry person is fed. You see Christ stepping into time there, and a glimpse of the glory yet to be revealed. You see it when someone who is the recipient of hatred raises up their head, and extends their hand, reaches out in love to one who has wronged them, like Christ does. You have seen previews. You are—we are—previews. We are to be glimpses of God’s coming, this season, and always.