

Introduction: wild

Hey ... he's here! The Lamb of God! The Savior of the world! Here he is!

What if I were serious? How would you react? What would it make you think? Would you be thinking of candy canes, "snow upon snow", five golden rings and that bothersome partridge in a pear tree?

It would grab your attention, wouldn't it! If you're sleepy it would wake you up! If you're distracted, it would focus your attention!

And if your mind is contemplating something ungodly, it would suddenly correct your course!

We will look at the primary Propers for the four Sundays in Advent and see what they have to tell us. The Propers are those "proper" prayers, Scripture lessons, responses, and other portions of the worship service that are designed to relate to the theme of a given Sunday, or other day of worship. They include the Collect, Psalm, Old Testament, New Testament, and gospel lessons, and various other portions.

In looking at how our reformational forebears have ordered our worship at this season of the year, I think that we will see a very important truth. I am calling the sermon "Countdown to Grace".

I have printed out the relevant texts and they are an insert in your bulletin.

Advent One

Advent One

The Collect

Let us look at the Collect together. Recall that a Collect—a noun in this use—is a short thematically concentrated prayer meant to reflect the theme of the season and the texts.

Let's look at the basic points of the prayer for Advent One.

- We are seeking God's grace, his undeserved kindness or unmerited favor, because ...
- We need to cast away the works of darkness and we need Him to put on us the armor of light, while we are still alive.
- This is the same life which Jesus took upon himself, humbly.

- But we recognize that he is coming again, majestically.
- And when he comes, he comes as judge, to see whether we have cast away the works of darkness and put on us the armor of light, and,
- To determine whether we will have eternal life.

The Epistle

The epistle reading from Romans sounds similar notes.

- Paul calls us to holiness.
- He does this with a tone of urgency. “It is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep ... the night is almost gone, and the day is near.”
- Why this urgency? Because “now salvation is nearer to us than we had believed.”

The Gospel

The gospel lesson is puzzling. In anticipation of Christmas, we began Advent at the end of Jesus’ ministry! We read the account of the triumphal entry into Jerusalem during the same week in which he was crucified!

Observations: Holy Preparation

The key theme for Advent One is that Jesus is coming back and we had better be ready.

- The one who was judged will return as the judge.
- We have a terrible responsibility to bear: we must cast off the works of darkness, something that we clearly cannot do ourselves.
- Oh yes—we had better hurry up, because that time is approaching faster than we imagine.

Advent Two

Advent Two

Collect

- All Scripture comes from God and is for our learning.
- Awakening from our sleep (as in Advent One), we need God’s help to turn to those Scriptures and truly absorb them: read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them.
- Why? Because if we patiently trust them, we will find contained therein

- “the blessed hope of everlasting life”.
- That is the hope which the Father has “given us in our Savior Jesus Christ”.

Epistle

The epistle reading for this Lord’s day is again from Romans.

- The Collect is echoing Paul’s words that what “was written in earlier times was written for our instruction”.
- We are to persevere in those Scriptures—casting off of the works of darkness and the putting on of the armor of light as in Advent One.
- These Scriptures are an encouragement to us, *so* that we are able to patiently persevere.
- Our patience and perseverance are worth it, because the age-old promises given to the fathers have been clearly confirmed in Christ.

Gospel

The gospel lesson from Luke 21 develops the theme of patient perseverance.

- Things will not always continue the way they are. There is an end coming.
- When that end comes, it will be an earth shattering disclosure of God’s will and judgment—literally.
- The one who came the first time in humiliation will then come in great majesty (as mentioned on Advent One).
- When that shaking up occurs, then everyone will know that redemption is at hand.

Observations: Patient Perseverance

The key theme for Advent Two is that everything we need to know about the full scope of God’s plans are revealed in Scripture.

Though it may not always be clear to us, we have good reason to hope, to persevere, to be patient, to be encouraged. God has already assured us of his faithfulness by sending the promised one once. He will fully seal his faithfulness when Jesus comes yet again.

Advent Three

Advent Three

Collect

- God sent a final messenger to prepare the way for Jesus' first advent.
- In preparation for the second advent, He continues to give ministers, stewards (or "caretakers") of God's mysteries. Note that a mystery is something undisclosed. So these servants of God are tasked with disclosing those truths that have been hitherto unrevealed, undisclosed.
- They actually do more than disclose the truth. They are responsible for "turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just", "so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."¹
- The prayer asks God to help those ministers to do this job well, so that when Jesus returns to judge the world, we may be found acceptable in God's sight.

Epistle

This portion from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians is instructive for clergy, but not for clergy alone. Listen to what he says.

- He tells the Corinthians that those who serve Corinthians do so, because they are Christ's servants first.
- Therefore, the judgment of the Corinthian church about how well Paul and his compatriots are doing is, quite candidly, not of much concern to Paul.
- That may sound arrogant, until you understand the reason why Paul says that. He says that, because he is far more concerned about the judgment of the Lord, than he is the judgment of the Corinthians.
- As he puts it, "wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God".
- That's a variation on "wait until your father gets home!" That performance review is of far more interest to Paul—and should be to us, too.

Gospel

- John wants to confirm that all on which he had bet his life and ministry was worth it, that it was what it seemed to be.
- It occurs to me that he was, in a sense, requesting a performance review from Jesus. "Have I done okay? I've been pointing to you as the promised one. Did I get it right?"

Observations: God's Messengers Empowered

The key theme for Advent Three is that the Lord had sent messengers

¹ Luke 1:17, citing from Malachi 4:5–6.

throughout the course of history to point a finger to the existence, holiness, and mercy of God. And the Lord continues to send messengers and they need the Lord's help to continue to make the way of the Lord clear to us—and we need to listen!

Advent Four

Advent Four

Collect

By way of review:

I. Advent One:

- We must cast off the works of darkness,
- And with God's help we must put on the armor of light.

II. Advent Two:

- We must thoroughly know the Scriptures,
- And with patient perseverance we must obey and trust what they tell us.

III. Advent Three:

- God has given messengers and ministers to his people who have and continue to prepare us for the first and second advents.
- This is so that we will not be caught short when Jesus returns to disclose the secrets of our hearts.

IV. Advent Four: Therefore,

- Lord, raise up your power!
- Lord, come into our midst!
- Lord, use your might to help us!
- Lord, we cannot run this race on her own!
- Lord, we know that you are coming soon; be gracious to us!
- Lord, we know that we cannot do this ourselves; we are undeserving. Therefore we ask these things "through the satisfaction of your son our Lord".

Epistle

Interestingly, while there is a sense of urgency, even desperation in the Collect for this Lord's day, the epistle is more comforting and calm.

- “The Lord is near.”
- “Be anxious for nothing.”
- That presupposes that we **want** the Lord to be near.

Gospel

John did his job well.

- He did not attribute any glory to himself, something that would’ve been tempting, given the interest shown in him and the wonderful results he obtained. He resisted that temptation.²
- He clearly knew his place. As a servant of the Lord, he was “a voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘make straight the way of the Lord’”.³ That was the task that had been assigned to him; it’s the task that he was faithfully fulfilling.
- He clearly pointed attention to Christ Jesus. Initially, he didn’t seem fully to recognize who his cousin was. Nevertheless, when “he saw Jesus coming to him ... [He] said, ‘behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he on behalf of whom I said, *after me comes a man who has a higher rank than I*’”.
- And again, “this is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit ... this is the son of God”.

Observations: Help Us!

The key theme here is clearly: help us! We cannot do this on our own! And above all, help us to listen and obey.

Conclusion

Conclusion

“A count down to grace”. Why this title?

1. First of all, notice that the themes of the gospel lessons in Advent run thematically *backwards*. We start at the end of Christ’s ministry with the triumphal entry. We end at the beginning of Christ’s ministry, just after his baptism.
2. Second, notice that none of the texts appointed mentioned the birth of Christ directly.

² Note Edersheim’s comments about this in “Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah”, Part 3 (The Ascent ...), Chapter 3 (The Twofold Ministry ...), p. 354.

³ In reference to Isaiah 40:3–4.

3. Third, all of the Collects emphasize our need for God's grace more than anything else.

Isn't Advent is about Jesus and his coming! Where are the baby, the manger, and the magi? There is a place to talk about the birth of Christ, indeed, 7 or 8 of them during the 12 days between 25 December and 6 January, Epiphany. Even there, we have taken the power, the muscularity of those 12 days and turned them into an arcane song about five golden rings and that pesky partridge.

What modern Christianity has done is move Christmas and Epiphany into Advent, while ignoring Advent altogether. In the history of the church of God, Advent is *not primarily about the birth of Christ*. It's about His return at the end of all things!

And because there is no other time in the church year given to that theme, we have effectively deleted any concern or interest in his second coming, in judgment, and eternal life! In so doing, it magnifies our weakness, our distance from God, and the unbearable burden of a holiness to which we can never attain.

When a proper understanding of the danger of condemnation is diminished, God's grace is likewise diminished. If contemplation of my sin and my need turns into a generic "we all have needs; we are all sinners", then the grace of God in Christ likewise becomes generic, unspecific, and even unimpressive.

However—and this is crucial—in magnifying our need for God's grace and the threat of judgment and condemnation, then God's incredible grace in Christ Jesus is also magnified.

Selections from Isaiah 40

3 A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the LORD in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. 4 "Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; 5 Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

6 A voice says, "Call out."

Then he answered, "What shall I call out?"

(NEED) All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. 7 The grass withers, the flower fades, When the breath of the LORD blows upon it; Surely the people are grass. 8 The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever. 9 Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; Lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!"

(GRACE) 10 Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might, With His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him And His recompense before

Him. **11** Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, In His arm He will gather the lambs And carry them in His bosom.