

## Second Sunday in Advent • December 6, 2015

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

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Malachi 3:1-7b

“The King’s Herald: Announcing the King!” (*The King is Coming*, pt. 2)

Christmas might not come this year.

But we just got a tree! It’s all decorated! I’ve made plans for parties and meals and family travels! I’ve gotten presents wrapped, and Christmas cards ready to be sent out! I’m looking forward to hearing Christmas music and seeing lights up all around town! I’ve got expectations for this season, so how can somebody just say that Christmas might not come this year?

That’s the thing about Advent. People tend to put so much expectation on the Christmas season that they overlook the importance of the season of the church year that precedes it. Advent is a time about getting ready. It’s pointing us to what’s coming next, announcing the great event that’ll be here before you know it. But for us Christians, Advent isn’t primarily about looking ahead to the celebration of our Savior’s birth in that little town of Bethlehem all those years ago: this is a season for looking ahead to the return of our coming King.

If you were here with us last weekend, you experienced the start of our Advent theme, “The King is Coming,” drawn from the Old Testament scriptures that are appointed for each of the Sundays in this season. With the prophets, we’re looking ahead to the fulfillment of God’s promise to send His anointed one, His Messiah, to take the throne and to rule over all of creation. As people of God’s new testament, though, we get to look ahead with the confidence of what’s come before: the incarnation, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth, God the Son. The scripture readings we hear in this time of Advent remind us that the story is not yet over. The King who ascended into the clouds forty days after his resurrection on Easter morning will come again as his people saw him go: in glory. We need a King like that these days, don’t we?

Ours is a broken world. There are many other words we could use to describe it: violent, fearful, uncertain, anxious, evil. The brokenness just keeps coming, too. We saw it again this past week in yet another mass shooting, where more lives were taken by terrible acts of hate. In the days following these acts, some pundits have criticized leaders who say that their “thoughts and prayers” are with the victims of these atrocities, suggesting that praying doesn’t make things better. Such actions, they say, aren’t worth much in the “real world.” What if a King stepped in to bring justice where it is needed, bringing an end to evil? Wouldn’t that be great? If we heard that was coming, maybe we could have at least a little hope.

Today’s first reading for this second Sunday of Advent comes from the prophet Malachi. Malachi lived among the people of Judah about a century after they had returned from their long exile in Babylon. God’s temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt, but it was far less impressive than the first, astoundingly beautiful one built under King Solomon. The nation hadn’t grown back to its former size or regained its past power. The people had heard tell of God’s promises from their parents and their parents before them, yet they saw no satisfactory evidence in the “real world” that God still remembered them. They felt forgotten, let down. Where was the fulfillment of God’s promised glory for His people? Where was the Messianic king who would come to set things right?

If you take a little time and read the rest of God’s message through Malachi, you’ll see that the people of Judah demonstrated a loss of confidence in God’s promise that shaped attitudes and actions that were offensive to God. The priests who were supposed to turn people away from wrong instead turned a blind eye to sin that was taking the people farther away from God. And when God’s people did participate in worship, they did it as an empty exercise, repeating words and actions that made them feel like they were keeping things OK with God. They presented improper offerings at the temple which reflected the complacency of their hearts. The nation was in a pretty sorry state. The people weren’t faithful to God or to each other. So when they wondered, “Where is the God of justice?” they didn’t realize the dire consequences of their request: God’s justice would upend their faithlessness. Returning suddenly to his city – as we heard in last weekend’s message – the Lord’s justice and might will prevail over evil and faithlessness. In His mercy, though, God sent His messenger to call the people to repentance. The King was coming, but he wasn’t coming unannounced.

That’s what a herald does: he announces the coming king, giving the people a chance to prepare. God sent the prophet to His people as His herald, calling them to prepare the way of the coming King. The

name *Malachi* even means “my messenger.” Malachi called the people to repent from their unfaithful living and make ready for the Messiah. “Get ready! You’re going to get what you’ve been waiting for all this time. Clear the way!” Heralds serve an important role, for the benefit of the people. Through them, God is calling His people to prepare. And in today’s text, Malachi even announces the herald (John) who will in turn announce the Messiah at his arrival.

Centuries after Malachi, God sent John to take up the mantle of “my messenger.” This messenger, like the King who he announced to the people, might not have been what the people were expecting; yet they were both exactly what the people needed. John, like Malachi, called the people out for their faithless attitudes and actions, along with their complacency. It wasn’t a pleasant message to hear; it drove people to despair. But isn’t it better to know where you stand than to think everything’s OK when it’s actually not?

“Prepare the way of the Lord! Get ready for the King who will suddenly return!” As we gather today, how does Malachi’s message, John’s message, call out to you?

What needs to be cleared from the path in your life this Advent? As you make ready for your Lord’s return, consider the obstacles that are getting in the way of your relationship with God. If you’re seeking to amend your daily life in this Advent season, think about how you’re doing with respect to the 10 Commandments. How are your actions and attitudes affecting your relationships with the people around you? Don’t turn a blind eye to things that have no place in a clean heart. Don’t allow complacency to set in and make worship an empty exercise. Make use of God’s gifts of confession and absolution to clear the path and make ready for your Lord’s sudden arrival, not just here in the sanctuary but in your everyday interaction with those people who are waiting and watching with you. (That’s one of the topics in this weekend’s adult education session, by the way.)

In Jesus, and through the gifts he gives, God upends our faithlessness. Entering in, Jesus makes us ready for his own arrival. That’s why you and I can look ahead in hope with the herald’s Advent announcement that something glorious is about to happen: the kingdom of God is at hand. Our Lord is coming into our broken world. He is coming to bring justice where it has been missing. He is coming to end evil. Jesus the Messiah is coming as the King of all.

So, yes, Christmas might not come this year. But in this time of Advent, be confident that your King is coming! And he’ll be here before you know it.

**Amen.**