

The way the world celebrates Christmas is backwards. The celebrating is done before the day arrives. Even prior to Thanksgiving Day, there are Christmas movies on TV, Christmas music on the radio, Christmas parades in the streets. Decorations and lights are up and going. Christmas parties and gatherings are taking place. By the time December 25th rolls around, we have all had enough of Christmas already and are quite eager to move on to other things.

This is how the world celebrates holidays in general, and especially Christmas, because this is how the world looks at life. You live, have your fun, and then you die and it's all over. So, make it count because first there's life, then there's death.

But this is backwards. With the Lord Jesus and with His church, it's the other way around. First there's death, and then there's life. For the Christian, life begins when we die. When we die with Christ in our baptism, and also when we die in Christ at the end of our days.

This is reflected in how we celebrate Christmas. We celebrate the holy day of our Lord's birth when the day arrives. The Twelve Days of Christmas begin, not twelve days before December 25th, but on the 25th and go until Epiphany on January 6th.

That is Christmas. And this right now is Advent. It is a time of preparation. Preparing for the coming, the advent, of our Lord Jesus. It is a time of repentance and also a time of hope, for we anticipate Christmas during Advent. But now is not the time for the full celebration. Thus, we omit the Gloria in Excelsis from our liturgy. That song of the angels comes on Christmas Eve, not before.

And so, in keeping with our faith, we could say that in Advent we die with Christ so that on Christmas we are born with Him to live the life He gives us in our baptism.

Our Gospel text for this First Sunday in Advent takes us to the days before Jesus died on the cross. His Palm Sunday entrance into Jerusalem on a donkey. Reflecting on this text helps us with our Advent preparation.

Consider that it was a donkey upon which Jesus rode. A stubborn animal. Very much a representation of you and me. Who of us is not stubborn and hard-headed? We want to go our own way in life. We resist being led, always wanting to return to our sinful ways. You know how it is with donkeys. When they are being pulled in a direction they do not want to go, they will sit back on their haunches and refuse to budge. That's us. We let the sinful world lead us. But when it's the Lord who is leading us, we act like a donkey. Back on our haunches we go, refusing to budge.

So, why didn't Jesus choose a different animal? A horse perhaps, or just His own two feet. But no, He chose a donkey. And He did this for our sake. Jesus did not beat the donkey into submission. He did not pull it along. He got on it and He rode it. He rode it to the place where He would die.

In your baptism Jesus came to you in full measure. He came to be with you, to live in you. He came, we can say, to ride upon you throughout your entire life. And because He does ride on us

as a donkey, He knows how stubborn we are. He sees the wrong directions we like to go in life. Does He beat us into submission to make us go His way? No. He is gentle and lowly of heart. He is kind and merciful.

When you and I go our sinful way in life, He calls to us in love. He reminds us that He went to the cross with all of our sin. And He died there with our sin. And so, your sin and mine has no power to pull us in the wrong direction. Jesus defeated the power of sin for us at the cross.

And He reminds us that in our baptism we died to sin with Him so that we now live with Him. The world lives, and then it dies. It lives in sin. It lives however it pleases. It cannot get enough of life because it knows that death follows life.

But you, dear Christian, are a different animal from that of the world. You may act like a donkey, but in truth you are a sheep. Sheep for whom your Lord was willing to die. And in His death for you comes life for you. First death, and then life. Life follows death for all who are in Christ Jesus.

And since you died to sin in your baptism, do you really want to live in sin right now? Rather, you and I want to do what the people did as Jesus rode along toward Jerusalem. They shed their cloaks and laid them down on the road.

When Jesus comes, as He is coming now, His advent, it is time for us to shed our stubborn sinful ways and lay them down before Jesus. This is repentance. And this we are called to do now in Advent and always. To die to sin so that in Christ we truly live.

And our sinful clothing we want to shed because, my friend, Jesus comes to clothe you with His own clothing. With His righteousness, His holiness. He covers you with His innocence. And what does He do with your old stubbornness, with your sinfulness? It is forgiven, completely forgiven. Not just for some of you. He forgives all of you because He shed His blood for all of you.

This is Advent, but the full celebration of Christmas is coming. And as certain as this is, it is also certain that to you who die now with Christ, there is coming the life in heaven. And so, you even now can truly anticipate that full celebration. On that day, my friend, you will hear the angels singing. And you will sing with them, "*Glory to God in the highest!*" Amen.