

**Luke 21:25-36; 19:28-40**

We might as well get out our shovels and start digging. Advent is dead. All it needs now is a proper burial. Even before the Thanksgiving dinner dishes were put back in the cupboards, people were out in mass to do their Christmas shopping; holiday lights are blinking; television is airing its Christmas specials; parties are being planned; Christmas music is on the radio; cards are being written; and goodies are being baked. Christmas comes but once a year, and for most people the weeks before Christmas have become a Pre-Christmas season—a time to prepare, not our hearts for the coming of Christ, but our houses, our pantries, and our stockings for the 25<sup>th</sup> day of December.

Now I'm not trying to sound like old Scrooge here. I'm not against planning for Christmas, and I'm not putting a "Bah! Humbug!" on your preparations. But it seems to me that what we see happening between Thanksgiving and Christmas is a reflection of what will happen before the Final Judgment. People are scurrying here and there. They're busy planning for a holiday. They arrange their schedules to include "get-togethers" and shopping trips. But how many are setting aside time for the Lord? How many are putting into their schedules the hearing and reading of His Word?

This is how it will be when Christ returns. People will be baking, eating, getting together; they will work hard to get their work done so that they can relax with family and friends—but few will be looking for His return. Few will be preparing their hearts for His coming on the Last Day. If people are not observing Advent now, why would they observe it then? If we're not preparing for Christmas by repentance, why would we prepare for Christ's final return?

Today is the First Sunday in Advent. It is good that we are here. For the time being let's put our shopping lists aside. Let's pause from our planning, and let's put down our shovels—because here in the Church we still observe Advent; here we gather to repent; and here we seek Christ who comes to us.

The purpose of Advent is to focus our attention on His coming. Both Gospel readings for this day do this. Luke 21 tells us of the final return of Christ on the clouds of Judgment. The alternate and traditional reading in Luke 19 speaks of Christ coming to His people on a donkey. Today we begin at the end—the final coming of Christ. And the sad truth is that so many in our day regard Jesus' warnings about the Final Judgment the same way that Harry Truman regarded the warnings about Mount St. Helen's eruption.

Harry was an 84 year-old innkeeper who lived near Mount St. Helen in the State of Washington. For more than fifty years he lived near this dormant volcano. In the spring of 1980 everyone was warned to evacuate the area because the mountain was going to blow its top. Most people left, but not Harry. He stayed. And after the volcano erupted, his body was never found.

Jesus says, "Watch and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man." It's not that Harry Truman didn't believe the volcano was going to erupt—he believed that when it erupted he would be able to stand. And so today, everyone knows the end is coming. We will all die. We will all

face God in the end. There is not much disagreement on this. But most people, like Harry, believe that when the end does come they will be able to stand.

Perhaps if Harry Truman had been able to witness, at some time in his life, the eruption of a volcano somewhere in the world—perhaps then he would have changed his mind. After witnessing the incredible destructive force that an eruption causes he may have realized that it would be impossible to stand in its wake. But he never had that chance. And neither do we. No one will observe Judgment Day before it comes. No one will see the absolute power of God on that day until it arrives.

And so Jesus warns us now. “Nations will be in anguish,” He says. “Men will faint from terror at what is coming.” When that day comes, “the heavenly bodies will be shaken.” “Heaven and earth,” He says, “will pass away.” In the end, everything will be gone except for you and God. Everything that we accomplished here on earth will be gone. We won’t be able to point to even one good thing that we did during our life here. It will all be gone. There will be nothing here for us to stand on. The work we did; the meals we prepared; the beautiful things we created—they will all be gone. All except for God. And each person who has lived on the face of the earth, on that day, must come face to face before Him.

And as the Psalmist cries, “If Thou, O Lord, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand?” Harry Truman was buried by Mount St. Helen’s eruption, and each one of us sinners also deserves to be buried beneath the wrath of God’s final fury.

When Jesus comes on the clouds of Judgment, it will be too late to begin observing Advent. When He comes with power and great glory, no one will be able, at that time, to repent of their sins. “Now is the day of salvation.” Tomorrow may be too late. Now as His warnings reach our ears He is calling us to leave our sinful ways behind.

If you and I ever become too complacent...too indifferent about Jesus’ final return, then let’s remember Harry Truman. If he could not stand before the quaking of even one mountain, how do we think that we can stand before the destruction of all things?

And now that we have seen the end let’s go back a little ways. Luke 19 comes before Luke 21. Before Jesus comes in power at the end of time, He comes gently to His people riding on a donkey. And that’s how He comes to you now—riding, not on the clouds of Judgment, but on things that are gentle and humble.

Jesus comes to you in the water and Word of Holy Baptism. But this water is not in the form of a terrifying cloud of Judgment, it is in the form of a cleansing bath. Here He comes to cleanse you of your sin. He comes to make you His holy child. He comes to give you life.

Donkeys were common in and around Jerusalem, and so is water a common thing to us. But Jesus chose to come to His people on a donkey, and so that donkey was no common animal anymore. It was cherished by the people as that upon which Jesus came to them. And so with water today...combined with the Word of God in baptism, it is precious to us, for in this water your Savior comes to you.

Dear friend, there is no need for you to fear the clouds of Judgment, because you are baptized in the water of life. In this cloud of water Jesus surrounds you day after day with His love and forgiveness. The cloud of water in which you live, as Jesus' baptized child, keeps you safe from the threatening clouds of Judgment on the Last Day.

And Jesus comes to you now with His body and blood in the humble means of bread and wine. He comes not to terrify you but to forgive you. He comes in this humble way so that you are strengthened in your faith. You need not fear the Last Day when the "heavenly bodies will be shaken," because Jesus gives His body to you—His body which paid the price for your sins. When that day comes you can "stand up and lift up your heads" rejoicing, because you stand now at His Table where He gives Himself for you and for your salvation.

The people of Jerusalem were not frightened by that donkey; they were glad to see it coming with Jesus riding on its back. You do not need to be frightened, friend, as you come to God's altar, for this bread and wine is nothing more than a humble donkey—and Jesus rides on it for you. He comes to save you from your sins. He comes to you gently today, so that you stand firmly in His grace now, and on the Last Day.

Here we are on the First Sunday in Advent, and the message is that Jesus is coming. If we stand apart from Christ now, then we will not be able to stand in the end. Do not fear. Jesus stood up for you before Pontius Pilate. He stood up for you to the whippings and the beatings. He stood before His accusers and He was condemned in your place. He was judged guilty for you.

Even though we don't always make room for Him in our life, He already made room for your sins on His cross. He forgives you. They stood Him up to die and He died for you so that you can stand with joy when He comes again. When that Day of Judgment comes upon the earth you will stand. You will stand with Jesus and on Jesus, because Jesus comes now for you to stand upon Him. He comes on His donkey to you. He comes with grace and mercy for you. You are forgiven. And that's why you will be able to stand, because even when heaven and earth pass away, you will still have Jesus, because Jesus, right now, has you. Amen.