

Third Sunday in Advent (a)
Isaiah 35:1-10 James 5:7-10 Matthew 11:2-11
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
December 11, 2022 [Traditional]

The season of Advent covers a lot of theological ground in just four weeks. Two weeks ago, Jesus himself was warning us about judgment day. Last week, John the Baptist was shouting out the warning: Not only is the final judge coming—he is actually *on the doorstep*. He will separate the wheat from the chaff. So get ready and make your paths straight! And shortly after, of course, Jesus shows up and is baptized by John. So we get the message, obviously, that the final judgment that John talks about is linked to Jesus. It's like the final judgment is actually being carried out in our lifetime, through Jesus. Jesus, the judge, has already come to us before the final judgment! So Judgment Day is not just something that's going to happen at the end of this world. It's happening now for each of us, right here in Grove City, as we stand before Jesus, the final judge; it's all about our response to the person, Jesus, here and now. So obviously, that can come across as a big warning, like...it's not just that the end is coming. It's that the end HAS COME. TIME'S UP! And that is absolutely true for you and me. Our time has run out. Jesus has come. As far as you and I are concerned, the final judgment has already been passed on us.

And now, today, John is back. But now there's another slight shift in the message. Now, after all the dire warnings of the last two weeks, we start to focus on the other side of that message. We start to see a glint of light in the darkness. There's something even bigger than the judgment we've been hearing about. Something right in front of us...a possible future we did not expect! It makes us hear that message...that our time has run out...in a whole new way.

It's that the judge, Jesus, is bringing God's life and power and love and forgiveness into the middle of this broken world right now for all who believe in him. So he's not just the judge in front of whom all people will stand on the last day. He's the Savior, who has come to bring life to the dead. For all of us in this room who know that we're dead, that we have died in our baptism into Jesus, for all of us who know that our time is up, that time has run out for us, this is good news. Wherever Jesus is, there is life in the darkness. Wherever Jesus is preached, the dead are raised up, good news goes out to the poor.

So even in the middle of all the destruction and decay and death—the signs of the END-- (which we already see plenty of, all around us), you and I who have been baptized into the death of Jesus, know that there's a new life flowing into this world through Jesus. In the middle of the heartbreak, the losses, the disease, the corruption—the light is shining.

So Advent covers a lot of ground, doesn't it. Brings us from a big tumultuous loud noisy picture, of a broken world that is coming to an end, to a something very small that happened in world's back yard long ago. So quiet. So under the radar. Something not national, but local. Small. And in that small, backyard event is where the path to God's future—the only future—was opened up for you and me.

That's a lot of biblical theology packed into one month. But there's one theme that holds the whole season together. Advent drives it home: We've got no control over God's plans, at all. The future is in his hands. And what a relief that is, what a difference that makes, when we finally accept it. It's like: You and I can jump into life completely now. We don't have to worry about changing the big picture anymore—we can just focus on those small things God has given us real control over today. I cannot fundamentally change the nature of this broken world in which I live. But I do know that God loves everyone enough to die for them. Jesus sets us free to invest in it, free to do all we can to make it better for other people. Yeah, it's all temporary. It's all coming to an end. Our efforts are never going to be final. The goods we achieve here are not going to last. It's about *who is with us*. Who is taking this journey with us? Are we living in the fear that our corrupt culture wants us to live in? Or are we living our lives generously, fearlessly? Are we pouring ourselves out, knowing that God brings life out of death?

Advent teaches us to really focus in on the miracles that that God is doing, and will do in our back yard. Look at John the Baptist in today's gospel. Last week he was free to preach in the wide open desert; now Herod has him locked up in a cage. And he's not going to get out...he's going to die, we know how it ends. That's how the greatest human being ever born of a woman, according to Jesus himself, dies in the bible. It's sad. And John, the greatest of human beings, is wondering whether his hope in Jesus has been misplaced. Things have not gone like he thought they would. You know what...it kind of makes me feel better that John the Baptist felt that way, because if the greatest human being felt that way, there's hope for me. But John initially expected Jesus to turn worldly politics upside-down. He thought Jesus was going to bring all the fullness of heaven to earth in his own lifetime. Instead, John has been completely humiliated. Rome is still in charge. The corrupt, ruthless people are still on top. The story did not play out in his own day, like he thought it would.

So, Jesus sends word to John in prison: open your eyes John, to what's happening wherever Jesus goes. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and good news is proclaimed to the poor. Now according to the Old Testament prophets, those are the signs that the end has come. A new world is coming into existence, when you see those things happening. And those things are happening wherever Jesus is. They're not happening across the world, all at once. They're happening where Jesus is. It's very local. It's here and there, week by week, in Grove City. It's when a member of St. John's points a lost person to Jesus. Christ did not come to flip a switch and visibly, forcefully, turn the entire world on its head overnight. He came to do something once and for all that none of us could hope to do: defeat death and sin and the devil. And now, that victory only becomes yours and mine through faith. And that power of new life and freedom, is only going to spread out into this world one person at a time. One household at a time. One child at a time. One friendship at a time. One coworker at a time. The kingdom, remember, is a tiny mustard seed that grows into a modest bush, a bush that people can easily overlook. But it's a hardy bush, and neighborhood by neighborhood, it'll spread across the whole world.

Advent reminds us: with our creaturely eyes, we cannot see the whole picture. God is at work out there, behind the scenes. So you and I...let's stick to the basics very patiently, knowing that God holds the outcome in his hands. It reminds me to stop complaining about the state of the world and focus on the power of God active in our own back yard. That's where this season leads us. To that birth, out back in the shed. We can follow the King that was born not on the commanding heights, but in the shed out back. A King who did not write a bunch of new rules or laws—but who followed and fulfilled all of them on our behalf. He didn't do anything by force. Only persuasion. He spoke his truth without getting bogged down in arguments. He led by example. He taught by *being and doing* what he taught.

Another truth that shines through here: the only real power we have to change the world as believers is through love. I've always secretly assumed that everyone should think the same way I do about everything. But God evidently thinks differently, because I've never changed anyone's life through the force of my ideas or arguments or wisdom. The only changes I've ever seen happen in other people that happened through something I might have done have always come as a surprise to me. When something I did or said led to change, I know full well it was not me, it was God who did it. All I did was love and respect someone. That's all.

And that's what Scripture tells us. Where do we see the light of the kingdom shining in the world? Not in great ideas, not in great wisdom. But in sacrificial love for your neighbor. Especially if your neighbor is your enemy. Let your love and your confidence and your fearlessness surprise them.

Jesus' birth took the world by surprise. Suddenly there he was...among us. He happened. It was not part of any human plan. No human could stop him from doing what he came to do; no human being could control him. And the blind started receiving sight, the lame started to walk, lepers were cleansed, the deaf began to hear, dead people came to life, and good news began to reach the poor. Let's pray that everyone around us will see that light shining when we walk into the room.