

1 December 2002
Advent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Alexandria, VA

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“The Prayer of Advent”

Text: Isaiah 63:16b-17; 64:1-8; Mark 11:1-10

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is the first Sunday of a new Church Year, the first Sunday in Advent, and tonight we heard an advent prayer from the prophet Isaiah. For the word advent means “coming” and Isaiah is praying that God would **come** and finally set things right! And so we heard his words, *“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down, that the mountains might quake at your presence – as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil – to make your name known to your adversaries, and that the nations might tremble at your presence!”* Isaiah wanted God to **come down** and end the exile of His people, and in a great show of power restore them to their promised land. Isaiah longed for God to **come down** and in a great show of power show once and for all who the true God was, in the face of all the false gods of the nations. Isaiah wanted God to **come down** and just set things right! Show His glory, use His power, and make the nations tremble! Why don’t you **come down** and do that, O God?

We know how Isaiah felt. For who among us hasn’t – at one time or another – wished that God *would* **come down** and set things right? There are so many problems in our world, with persecution and wars. There are so many problems in our country, with immorality and abortion, selfishness and greed, so little regard for life or truth. There are so many problems in our churches, with fights over doctrine and divisions, with so many false sects and false religions arising, with apostasy from the truth. Its tempting, isn’t it, to pray the prayer of Isaiah and ask God to **come down** and just set things right! And not just for us, but for the glory of His own Name! Show His power, establish the true doctrine and religion, and make the nations tremble! Isn’t that even what we prayed for in the Collect this evening? *“Stir up, we implore you, your power, O Lord, and come!”*

But even as he asks this of God, Isaiah recognizes that there is a problem. They don’t deserve God’s help. For, Isaiah writes, God acts on behalf of *“those who wait for Him . . . who joyfully work righteousness . . . who remember his ways.”* But the reason the people of Judah and Isaiah are in exile is because they forgot God and His ways. They corrupted the worship of God and as a result, God disciplined them with the defeat of

their armies and their being hauled off into exile in Babylon. And Isaiah realizes this when he says, ***“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls upon your name, who rouses himself to take hold of you.”*** Isaiah knows that they are not worthy to ask anything of God.

But that brings up another problem with Isaiah’s request and prayer – for if God were to **come down** in power and set things right, and act against sin, and make those who do not acknowledge Him tremble in fear, then He would, in fact, also be doing this to His own people. For as Isaiah just acknowledged, they are sinners; they have forgotten about God; they have turned away from Him and followed false gods. Therefore, for God to do what Isaiah asked would be to bring justice not only against *other* people and nations, but upon His own people as well. They deserved God’s wrath and displeasure and punishment just as much as the next guy. . . . And the truth is, so do we. For the sin that we like so much. For the false gods we have in our lives – those things we put before God in our hearts. For following God with *part* of our lives, but reserving a part for ourselves, to follow our own desires. We have met the enemy, and he is us.

And so Isaiah ends his advent prayer by leaving what will be done in God’s hands. He has poured out his heart to God, knows the problem and the dilemma, and so leaves the answer to God. ***“But now, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”*** It is humble resignation. Yes, they have been disobedient children, but God is still their Father. And while yes, their Father has disciplined them, there is a reason for it, and a time set for it. And the hand of God is at work in them, according to His loving purpose. As a potter works the clay. He will answer, in His own way and time. He will act, but in ways perhaps different than what Isaiah has here asked. He has laid his request before God, and now waits in humble expectation.

And in that way we are very much like Isaiah, especially during Advent, a season of waiting and expectation. For we too are waiting for God to **come** – to come again at the end and set things right, as we heard in our readings the last few weeks. And like Isaiah, we too wait in humble resignation, not knowing the how or the when, but trusting in our loving Father, and in His loving purposes. We pray and lay our requests before Him, knowing that we are *“worthy of none of the things for which we ask,”* (expl. to 5th petition) but knowing that He will answer in His own way and time. It is as we prayed in the Introit: ***“To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul; in you I trust, O my God. . . . No one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame.”***

But while we are very much like Isaiah, we are at the same time also **unlike** Isaiah,

because while we are waiting for God to come again, we also are able to look back and see how God did answer the prayer of Isaiah; how He did come to set things right. And that was by sending His Son. And so we heard today the traditional Gospel for the First Sunday of Advent, the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. God **had come** to set things right! But it was not in a way that so many – even His own disciples – expected. It was not in a great show of power and majesty and glory, in making the nations tremble, and re-establishing a great kingdom on earth. Rather, His power was weakness. His glory was lowliness. His majesty was meekness. His throne was a cross. His victory was in death. The nations did not tremble but laughed at Him and plotted against Him. He rode not a war horse, but a work horse, a donkey. He was accompanied not by legions of soldiers armed with weapons of war, but by singing crowds of women and children, armed with palm branches. His friends and allies were not the politically connected, the rich and the powerful, but sinners, tax collectors, and outcasts. And by the shouts of the crowd, we hear that this man, humble and riding on a donkey, was God's answer to Isaiah's advent prayer. For He is the One who was to come. ***"Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"***

But while all of this scene looks and sounds like foolishness to the world, it reveals to us the wisdom of God, whose answer to our prayers may not be what we expect, but is even better. For in His Son Jesus Christ God **has come**, and has provided a way to conquer sin but save the sinner. He has provided a way to be the just punisher of sin, but at the same time the merciful forgiver of sin. He has provided a way through death, and provided a new tree of life that we may eat of and live forever. And in His Son, He has done that! He **has come** and set things right. He **has come** and revealed His glory and majesty in lowering Himself to us to rescue us. He **has come** and revealed His power in allowing Himself to be crucified so that He might bare His arm and fight our most powerful enemies: sin, death, and the devil. And He **has come** and revealed His love by taking our humanity, that we may be partakers of His divinity. He has taken all that is ours and given us all that is His, so that we are no longer outlaws, but sons; no longer enemies, but inheritors; no longer sentenced to death, but given the gift of life. . . . It is just as Isaiah prayed – our Lord **has come** and has set things right again – and not just for *some*, but right between God and *all* of mankind.

And that is how He is still **coming** to us today, in answer to our prayers. For His power, glory, wisdom, and strength are not to be found in what the world would consider great shows of power and might and in awesome and spectacular displays – but still in what appears to be very humble and weak: His Word and His Sacraments. Simple words on a page, water poured on a head, bread and wine given into a mouth. But while this all looks like foolishness to the world, it is in fact the power of God for salvation. For in

these means is where we find the forgiveness of our sins; here we are made sons of God and inheritors of His kingdom; and here is the tree of life, that we may eat and drink of the fruits of Christ's cross and live forever. And while all of this may not look very impressive or powerful, it doesn't need to. These means have the power of the promise of God attached to them, and it is His Word and promise which make them what they are – our means of His grace, and the wisdom and the power of God. To conquer the sin but save the sinner. To forgive and restore. . . . And so that is why we too, as our Saviour comes to us here today, sing the same words those crowds did as our Saviour entered Jerusalem. *For we are witnessing the same reality. "Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"*

And so today we pray with the prophet Isaiah: *"Stir up, we implore you, your power, O Lord, and come!"* And we sang the hymn the Church has sung since the fourth century: *"Saviour of the Nations, Come!"* And in just a little while, we will pray the prayer our Lord has taught us and pray, *"Thy kingdom come!"* And in all of those prayers, we recognize advent – the coming of our Lord. That our Lord has come, that He is still coming to us here, and that He is coming again. In His first coming He came in *humility* and set things right between God and man. In His coming still today He comes in *mercy* to give us His gifts of forgiveness and life. When He comes again, it will be in the *full power and majesty* of His Godhead. . . . But until that day, we pray with Isaiah, and wait in expectation. Not knowing the how or the when, but knowing that our Father and Saviour is faithful. Not knowing what will happen in our world, in our country, or in our lives, but knowing that our Father and Saviour is strong to save. Not knowing, but waiting and trusting, that just as He comes to us today, He is coming again. Marantha! Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds steadfast in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.