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Advent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

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“Truly He Fulfills His Word”

Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 19:28-40 (1 Thessalonians 3:9-13)

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

We heard from the prophet Jeremiah in the Old Testament reading today. And we heard this:

***“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.***

It took a while, but the days had indeed come for Jeremiah’s prophecy to be fulfilled; for *God’s Word* to be fulfilled. Good news for them. And good news for us who live in a world of empty words, dashed hopes, and broken promises. In a world of commitments not followed through on, shattered dreams, and a future we don’t always look forward to. **Not so with God.** His words, His promises, are always brought to completion and fulfilled. And at just the right time. God’s time. So while Israel had to wait a while, the time had finally come.

Jeremiah continues and explains how: ***In those days and at that time*** [of fulfillment] ***I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David . . .***

***A righteous Branch*** had to spring up because the great tree that had been the kingdom of Israel had been cut down and reduced to a stump. David’s glory and Solomon’s wisdom and wealth were, by Jeremiah’s day, but a distant memory. What had once been a great and grand and glorious kingdom, the envy of nations and blessed beyond imagination, had been reduced to a shell of its former self, because of their idolatry, their unfaithfulness, its people in exile, and its land now ruled by others, lesser nations. All looked dead . . . and hopeless.

But again, **not so with God.** Our God who *specializes* in giving life to the dead! And so ***in those days***, as Jeremiah said, a branch started to grow. It didn’t look like much at first - a baby in a manger is a twig so small it is easy to miss. But that baby grew into a branch - the Branch *of David, from David, for David.* David’s promised Son who would sit on his throne forever. The days, the time, had finally come.

And of this Son, this Branch, Jeremiah says:

*. . . he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it - by which HE - will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'* ”

What good news that was to the ears and hearts of those burdened and oppressed; to a land so long occupied by foreign and ungodly kings and armies. This Branch, this Son, would *save Judah and make Jerusalem dwell securely again*. Secure. Confident. Without fear and dread. Yes, His kingdom would be great and glorious again. And He will establish this new incarnation of Israel, Jeremiah said, by *executing justice and righteousness in the land*. So much so, in fact, so synonymous would justice and righteousness be with Him, that His name would be called: *The Lord our righteousness*. To give Him such a name is kind of like what happened to, for example, Ronald Reagan. He was so good at giving speeches and talking to the American people that he came to be called “the great communicator.” So this one, David’s Son, would *execute justice and righteousness* so fully and completely that He would be called “the Lord our righteousness.”

But what was so surprising what not *that* He would do that, but *how*. For He would execute justice and righteousness and make the people dwell securely again by being executed Himself; and not with a great and powerful army, but as an army of one. On a cross.

And so Jesus enters Jerusalem, as we heard in the Holy Gospel. The Son of David enters the city of David. The true King of Israel returns to Israel. And He does so to be executed.

Now it always seems strange to some that we begin a new Church Year and this season of Advent by reading the story of Palm Sunday - but we do so because knowing the ending helps us understand the beginning.

And so the righteous Branch, born in Bethlehem (as we will celebrate in a few short weeks) enters Jerusalem. Six short days after that He will be dead and buried, and the shouts and joy of the people turned to mourning and despair. A week that had started with such promise seems to have ended with such a crushing defeat. They had *rejoiced and praised God for all the mighty works they had seen* Jesus do, and they had seen plenty. And seeing Jesus enter Jerusalem like that, they had hoped to see more; even expected it. They *didn't* expect to see their King crowned with thorns, hailed with mockery, whipped, shamed, and then enthroned on a cross.

But in witnessing that, they did, in fact, see another mighty work of God. His mightiest work. For the greatest and most glorious work of God, and of all time, was the death and resurrection of Jesus. His death in our place for our sins and His resurrection crushing

death and the grave. Picture all the mighty things we've seen in just our lifetime, from nuclear bombs to powerful computers to men in space and on the moon - yet the might of all these things pales in comparison with the might of God that conquered sin, death, devil, hell, and the grave. . . . They just didn't realize it. They didn't understand what they had witnessed. And so after that some gathered behind locked doors, others walked home in sadness, and the women planned to take care of His lifeless body and give it a proper burial after the Sabbath. The Palm Sunday balloon, once so festive, now lay deflated and dead.

But the justice and righteousness of God had been executed, carried out. Like the Old Testament kingdom of Israel, the Branch looked dead, but would reappear - resurrect! - and grow again. And that Branch is still growing, as the kingdom of God, the new Israel, the Church, is growing all over the world. Not a kingdom of this world, a kingdom bigger than this world. For the kingdoms of this world rise and fall, but Kingdom of God will never end. And it is growing as the Word is being proclaimed, people are being baptized, sinners are being absolved, and the faithful are being fed. It may not always look like much, but do not be deceived - *the Branch is growing*.

And when that Branch first started to grow in Bethlehem, when Jesus was born, very similar words to the ones that welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem were spoken. Words of multitudes were at both event. On Palm Sunday, as we heard today, it was the multitude of pilgrims who cried out: "***Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!***" At Jesus' birth, it was the multitude of angels who proclaimed to the shepherds: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace . . .*"

*Did you hear?* Very similar words. Both declare *glory to God in the highest*, but while the crowds on Palm Sunday say ***peace in heaven***, the angels at Jesus' birth announce *peace on earth*. Because the angels knew what the crowds did not - that in Jesus, the peace of heaven had come down to earth. That Jesus had come to bring heaven and earth together in peace again. The division and enmity caused by sin would be healed in Him. God and man would be at peace once again.

And that is the gift given to us. The gift Jesus is born to give, the gift He dies to provide, and the gift He is risen to keep giving to us still today. To newborns, those near death, and everyone in between. The gift to, as St. Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, ***establish your hearts blameless in holiness***.

Because - and this is the point - in this world and life, that's what we truly need. For if there's peace throughout the whole world and in all the kingdoms of this world, but your heart and your conscience are not at peace, it doesn't matter. It does you no good. There are people who are very wealthy and seem to have everything, but in reality are in turmoil because their hearts and conscience give them no rest.

But with this gift, with a heart and conscience that knows that your sins are forgiven, you have peace with God, and knowing that no matter what happens in this world and life that you have an eternal home with Him and so you and your future are safe and secure . . . then it doesn't matter what is happening in the world all around us, or how much stuff we have - you have peace. You've seen people like that too. People whose lives are falling apart, people in trouble and danger, and yet who are joyful and at peace. It's remarkable . . . and it's the gift of God in Christ Jesus for you. That's the peace your Father in heaven has for you. The confidence of life in His Kingdom.

And so Jesus will come again today and set His Table before us in the presence of our enemies, as the 23rd Psalm puts it. The enemies of a radical secularism raging on one hand, and a radical militant Islam raging on the other. The enemy of sin crouching at the door of your heart, wanting to have you, to drag you down into rebellion and despair. Or maybe for you, the enemy named death drawing near. What are the enemies you find yourself in the midst of right now . . . like Judah and Jerusalem were in Jeremiah's time?

Well, here's the good news - Jeremiah's prophecy has come true, for you. For right here and now, in the midst of those enemies, your Lord has kept His Word and is come with His forgiveness; come to feed you and give you peace. Come to give you Himself and His kingdom. The enemy cannot have you. Its victory is swallowed up by Jesus' Blood. So that sin weighing on your heart and conscience? *Forgiven*. Your death so near? *Conquered*. A world falling apart? You have a kingdom that never will. And with all that, this too, *peace*. For Christ has advented, come, for you and you are His. So that not just Judah and Jerusalem, but you are *saved* and *dwell securely* in Him.

For truly He fulfills His Word.

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