

16 December 2015  
Advent 3 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church  
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“God’s Advents: The Last Day”

Text: Joel 2:1-11; Revelation 6:12-17; Matthew 25:1-12

How do you help someone who doesn’t want to be helped? Or, how do you help someone who doesn’t think they need help; who sees no danger? Maybe you’ve been there. It’s challenging. It’s frightening. It’s heart-wrenching.

It is what God faced with the people of Judah in Joel’s day. The people were in a bad way, the way of idolatry and rebellion against God. But they thought everything was okay, that there was no danger, because everything seemed to be going well. And outwardly, it may have been so. But inwardly, all was sin and death. And God knew it. So He sent the prophet Joel to the people, to call them to repentance, to turn them from the way they were going and back to God. And to warn them, that if they didn’t, disaster awaited. And what a disaster! Joel’s words that we heard tonight are very frightening indeed. That God was going to bring in an enemy army that would be like a locust swarm, to devour the kingdom, the land, and the people. Nothing would escape them, so that the people would *have to* turn to Him; there would be nothing else left to turn to. Yet even so, the people ignored Joel and mocked him. He was a stupid fool in their eyes. So they continued, and the army came and swept them away.

But Joel’s words weren’t just for the people of Judah back then. As you keep reading, you soon realize that Joel is speaking of a far worse day as well. A day that this first frightening day is but a foreshadowing of. The day when days will end. When not an enemy army, but God Himself is going to come, and there will be no more chance to turn. On that day, not only will the people tremble, but so will the heavens and the earth that God created in the beginning. The ***sun and moon will be darkened*** and the ***stars will withdraw their shining***. This day of the Lord will be ***great and awesome***, and, Joel asks, ***who can endure it?***

The answer is clear. **No one**, Adam and Eve call out to us from behind their leafy hiding place. **No one**, the people at Mt. Sinai call out to us from their terror and fear. **No one**, the people we heard from in the reading from Revelation tonight call out to us; the people who want the mountains and rocks to fall on them and hide them ***from the one who is seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb***.

*The wrath of the Lamb*. Isn’t that an interesting phrase? Lambs aren’t wrathful; they are gentle. They aren’t fearsome; they’re cute and cuddly. And the Lamb who is sitting on the throne of God in heaven is the Son of God who isn’t against His people, but for them!

It is Jesus who *advented*, who came, and was born a man like us, and then laid down His life for us. It is Jesus who atoned for our sins by offering up His life as a sin offering, that we need hide no longer. It is Jesus who took the wrath against the sin of the world *for us*, in our place. And yet you see what sin has done, how badly it has twisted us and our minds? That instead of seeing Jesus as Saviour, people see Him as threat. Instead of loving, as mean. Instead of merciful, as their enemy. And see sin as what we want; what will give us what we need.

And so into such a tangled and twisted world, comes Advent. Calling us to repentance, like the prophet Joel, to realize that cross and discipline now is better than terror at the end. Preparing the way, like John, to level the mountains of sin we have piled up, to fill in the valleys of sin we have dug, and to straighten the crooked road of sin we have constructed. To unweave the web of sin that has so ensnared us that we cannot see rightly anymore; that we see Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. And that He is the Lamb returning for us.

With such knowledge, with such faith, that Last Day will be quite different for us. A day of joy and anticipation, like the virgins waiting for the Bridegroom to come. But *how* we wait is important, too; that we wait well and wisely. That we not be foolish and unprepared, and not full of ourselves, but instead filled with the faith and forgiveness our Lord gives now through His Word and Sacraments. That we be filled now with His Spirit, with His Body and Blood, and with His love and mercy. That filled with Him and hidden in Him, we stand on that Last Day and not only endure, but enter into the marriage feast which has no end.

But such knowledge, such faith, can make a difference for us even now as well. For fear, as Adam and Eve and the people of Mt. Sinai will tell you, makes us act in very uncharacteristic ways, as fear makes us lash out, as it divides, as it turns us against one another. As it makes us blame, excuse, and deny. As it controls us and paralyzes us.

But there is a better way. Instead of living in fear and hiding from God and from each other, to hide in and trust His forgiveness. That's hard. We'd rather be in control instead of trusting Him and we hate to admit we're wrong and repent to each other. But look at the messes we've made. Is that old way really the way? Again, the answer is clear.

So this season, the manger calls out to us a new way, a new life. It is the message of the angels - not only that a Saviour is born, but they say this too: *fear not*. Afraid to repent? Fear not. Afraid to forgive? Fear not. Afraid to give up your sins? Fear not. Afraid of losing control? Fear not. Afraid to love? Fear not. Afraid to help? Fear not. Afraid to be helped? Fear not. Afraid of life? Fear not. Afraid of death? Fear not. In this one, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, we need fear no thing. He is our peace. He is our life. He is our confidence. He is our Mighty Saviour.

And we who kneel before Him now, will stand before Him in the end.

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