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Advent 1

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Come Now! Come . . . How?”

Text: Isaiah 63:16b-17; 64:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 11:1-10

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

Every so often, magazines and TV news reports carry stories of “stupid criminals.” For example, the drug dealer who called the police to get his drugs back, because the man he tried to sell them to instead held him up. Or the robber who called 911 because he got stuck trying to break into a store, and he wanted the fire department to come and get him unstuck! And you probably have heard more stories like that. Sometimes we want help or revenge so badly that we cannot see the problem with what we ourselves are doing.

Well that’s kind of what we hear from the prophet Isaiah this morning – at least, at the beginning. Isaiah is calling upon God like we call upon the police, to come and rescue us. To come with guns drawn and sirens blaring, with a big show of might and strength and justice. To use His power to destroy everything that’s wrong in this world. Just listen to Isaiah again, and hear that: ***“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! When You did awesome things that we did not look for, You came down, the mountains quaked at Your presence.”*** Or in other words, come and set everything straight. Come and punish the evildoers. Come and trample those who now are trampling on You and Your Word. Come! Come now!

And it sounds good, doesn’t it? Satisfying! Seeing justice meted out. Seeing wrongdoers get what they deserve. Maybe you’ve even prayed a prayer like that.

But about half-way through his prayer, Isaiah changes. He backs off what he has been saying, because he realizes that *were* God to come down in that way, it’s not just *others* who would receive justice, who would be destroyed – **it would be Him . . . and all of us too.** For the sin and wrong and evil in the world is not just from others, it is from us. It’s not just *them*, out there, that’s what’s wrong with the world – *we’re* what’s wrong with the world. The hatred and evil, the envy and jealousy, the pride and arrogance, the lack of love and selfishness that we see *out there* – it is alive and well in our hearts as well. Oh, maybe it *shows* itself in different ways when we sin – more *respectable* ways. We don’t destroy

others by blowing ourselves up like terrorists – oh no, we destroy them with our words instead. We don't break into people's houses or steal credit card numbers from web sites – but we know how to take advantage of others, to get what we want, to make things work for our advantage. We don't have affairs with other people's spouses – but we know how to sneak a peak at certain internet web sites, or certain channels on the TV. You see, we can dress it all up and explain it all away however we like, and we may not think *our* sin as bad as those others. But make no mistake about it – in God's eyes, it is the *same* sin, deserving of the *same* judgment, and subject to the *same* perfect justice of God. . . . And so Isaiah quickly changes his tune: ***“in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved? 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.”*** Isaiah knows, and he wants us to know – we have met the enemy, and he is us. In our anger and self-righteousness, perhaps we'd better wait before dialing that divine 911 . . .

But during the season of Advent that we begin today, we remember that God did answer the prayers of His people and come down. He did ***rend the heavens*** and come down – only not in His naked, unfettered, terrifying power; to mete out justice and judgment on His enemies! No, **He came** instead naked and helpless, as a tiny baby, given the name Jesus. **He came**, not to bare His arm in a show of strength and vengeance, but to bare His back to the smiters, to the rebels, to the sinners. **He came**, not to mete out justice and judgment, but to take it Himself. **He came** to be the criminal on the cross in our place, that the fire of God's wrath against all our sin and evil would be poured upon Him, and not us. And when that happened, the earth did tremble – it trembled at the sight of seeing its Creator die at the hands of stupid criminals. At our hands. Because of our sins.

And so today we heard in the Holy Gospel of Jesus entering Jerusalem – not with guns drawn and sirens blaring, with a big show of might and strength and justice; but entering in humility. The only weapons being brandished that day were cloaks and palm branches. And no shouts of war, only shouts of blessing. The King coming to His people. Or, to put it in terms of the reading that we heard last week: the Bridegroom coming to His Bride, and laying down His life for her. And as we sang earlier: ***“See, your King comes to you,”*** – How? – ***“righteous and having salvation.”*** (Introit Antiphon)

You see, that is how our King is coming *now* – not with judgment and justice, but with salvation. Not with punishment, but with forgiveness. For now is the day of grace – for you and me and for all people. And so we call on a God who is not a Divine policeman, but as Isaiah said: ***“You, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Your name.”*** **Our Father**, loving us with a perfect love. Knowing how to lovingly chasten us and discipline us for our good. Providing us with all that we need. And **our Redeemer**, who comes to us to save us from the ravages of the sin *around us* and the sin *within us*. To save us by dying and rising, so that we too may die and rise with Him – dying to the old, stupid, sinful self

that lives in each of us, and rising to live the new, righteous life that our Redeemer gives to us. To make us children of our Heavenly Father. . . . For that is how our King reigns. He is not a King impersonal and far off, but a King who comes to us, who is with us in everything, and who wants not so much to rule us but to save us. So that Isaiah can say by the end: ***“O Lord, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand.”***

And to this end, Your Father is working in you. Molding you in the forgiveness of your sins. Molding you as His Word is planted in your heart and grows. Molding you as His body and blood feed you and you grow up in your salvation. (1 Peter 2) And while what you will be may not be known now, you can still be absolutely confident in the salvation your Saviour came to bring to you in His incarnation, and is coming even now to bring to you in His Word and Sacraments. And that which He has promised, He will do. For the words of comfort that St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians are true for you as well: that ***“as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, [He] will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”***

And that is how we will see our Father and Redeemer in the end, on the last day, at the Final Judgment. Not so much as our judge, but as our Saviour. For how we know Him now is how we will know Him then. If you know Him as a harsh, taskmaster, law-giving God *now*, so He will be for you *then*. If you think of Him as a distant, impersonal, unknowable God *now*, so He will be for you *then*. But if *now* you know Him as your Saviour who laid down His life for you, *then* so He will be in the end. And that day for you will not be one of terror and anxiety, wondering what the judgment and the outcome will be for you. It will be a day of rejoicing, and reunion, and life.

And the hymn we will sing as the closing hymn today speaks of this reality as well. For we will sing that when Jesus comes again, we will see *“those tokens of His passion, that still His dazzling body bears.”* The tokens of His passion: the striped back; the pierced hands and feet; the hole in His side. What He did for us, endured for us, will never go away. And while for His enemies, those marks will be the cause of great weeping, wailing, and distress – for us and all who believe, they will be the cause of greatest rapture! Joy beyond anything we have yet experienced! To see those marks of His love, of His salvation, of all that He did for us. To see how great His love for you. And we will again shout, as the crowds did in Jerusalem, ***“Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.”*** Just as we do in the liturgy even now as He comes to us in His body and blood. For as He is our Saviour now, so too will He be in the end.

So, **Savior of the Nations, Come.** (LW #13) Yes, and so we prayed: *“Stir up, we implore You, Your power, O Lord, and come . . .”* (Collect for the Day) How? With Your power made perfect in

weakness. The power of Your cross. The power of forgiveness. With that power, come.
Come now!

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

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