

Advent I – December 2

Happy New Year!

That probably sounds a little out of place right now, about four weeks early. But the liturgical calendar always starts on the Sunday which is closest to the feast day of Saint Andrew, the first of the Disciples which the Gospels record Jesus calling. This year that first Sunday falls as late as it possibly can, creating the shortest possible Advent season. The fourth week of Advent consists of a single day, Sunday, Dec. 24.

Advent presents us with some unique challenges. The culture is against us as we would lead our congregations in the celebration of Advent. Since the season itself was an accommodation of some sort to the cultures of centuries past, perhaps we need to find some way to keep the valuable and essential parts of Advent but repackaging them so they fit into our culture.

Advent has several themes.

1. The season puts us into the shoes of our Jewish forebears; it remembers the many centuries of waiting which marked the years of the Old Testament. The season reminds us that we are not there yet, heavenly joy is ours by promise but not by sight. (This results in a much-muted element of self-denial in the season. Usually this is simply noted by the absence of the Hymn of Praise and little else in the liturgy.) In this season the preaching needs to happen sometimes in the future tense. When we get to Christmas, we shift to the present tense.
2. The season also reminds us that we are waiting for the revealing of Christ on the last day, expecting his appearance with a joy that exceeds our expectation of Christmas. (This results in an eschatological tenor to the readings, we will find them especially in the OT readings and the Gospels.) This might build on last week's "Now/Not Yet" theme. Christ is here, but we wait for the day when we will see him with our eyes – when the veil that conceals him now is torn away.
3. The season has a penitential motif as well – culturally we hardly see this at all, but John's words in the Gospel readings scream "Repent." If we can get our heads up from the sales circulars and the orgy of gift buying, we might hear that. It would seem that the proper posture for those who prepare to celebrate a feast and who prepare to meet their king is to repent. Kneeling is the posture of Advent.
4. The season of Advent also has a strong love motif running through it. We see remnants of this in the bell ringer who is soliciting a gift to the poor. This act of Christian "charity" which is really love, is the way that we have long observed this season. This might be something that is easier for us to retain in this time. Are we designating the Advent service offerings to some worthy human need in our community? Do we gather a special offering or perhaps encourage folks to volunteer at a food bank or other good thing that is happening in the local community. I think this is a time to get local with the love.

5. The season also has a strong Light and Darkness motif. Of course we see this in the Advent wreath but also in the lights we string on our houses. This seems to come from the northern European roots of the season when the nights grow very long and the feast of Christmas marks the return of light. As the weeks of Advent pass, the days grow darker but we light more candles knowing the time of light draws nearer. This also has an eschatological theme. We have often lost sight of this and tried to give our rituals meanings which are not actually native to those rituals. The color (blue, pink, purple) of the candles on the Advent wreath is one of those imported rituals. It seems that with the arrival of electric lights, we lost sight of the power of light. The color of the candles is not the point, it is the light, and as the Light of the world comes nearer the light gets brighter. You can use any color of candle you want, white or blue. The pink candle on the third Sunday is a very recent attempt to import meaning to this Advent wreath tradition.
6. The season has a sense of eager expectation to it. It is a wholly other sort of season in this than Lent; although, at times preachers have tried to make this into a miniature Lent and the Eastern Orthodox are especially good at that.

What will we do with this season? If we neglect it and just sing the Christmas songs now, the actual Christmas festival gets to be anti-climactic. We are weary of it before it gets here. On the other hand, if we don't sing those Christmas songs, we are grumpy old preachers fighting some losing battle against the culture. It is not an easy thing and there is no obvious path to pursue here.

In years past I have suggested that the penitential nature of Advent may need to be re-evaluated in our time. I suggested therein that the penitential theme might fit better when our parishioners are themselves feeling the hammer of the law. We have a great anticipation of Christmas and the commercialization of Christmas has almost wholly located the festivities to the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Our people are not looking to repent in this period, but quite often they have a letdown immediately after Christmas, leaving them feeling empty and facing the ramifications of their excess. New Year's shows up with its resolutions (penitential vows?). And then the credit card bills show up and we are really in a penitential mood. This is a pastoral decision. Our liturgical calendar assumes a 12 day festival which begins on Dec. 25 and concludes on Jan 6, but by then our people are sick of Christmas. Do we cede the Christmas tidings to the culture in a sense? They are already humming the Christmas songs on Dec 1, do we let them celebrate then, and then hit them with penitence after the 25th, when normally Christmas is supposed to happen, but now they are regretting their excesses? This is not an easy decision nor one which we make with some sort of doctrinal certitude. It is a pastoral decision which we make with the full and grateful awareness that Christ has not spoken a law here. He has spoken a mandate to preach the kingdom. The strategy he has largely left up to us, assuring us that even when we have erred and made mistakes we later came to regret, he was always working through us.

Collect of the Day

Stir up your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

This is the first of the three “stir up” prayers. Careful attention to what is stirred up will be fruitful for the preacher. Today we ask God to stir up his power and come so that he may protect us. With the psalmist we today are wondering where our defender and our helper is (see Psalm 13 too.) Stirring up God’s power is not an entirely safe thing to do. Most of the world would much rather that he stays rather dormant. We like the nice predictable, if deteriorating, world in which we live. This stirred up power has serious potential to cause some problems for us. God’s power is not safe. It will make us uncomfortable. We like to be comfortable.

But the Christian is aware of another set of perils, the perils of our sins. What if some of the promises which scientist tantalize with us come true and they are able to radically extend a human life. Can you imagine a life lived like this for 1000 years? That would not be heaven, but rather it would be hellish. And if the trajectory were to continue for 10, 000 years, it would certainly be unbearable. If I am eternally alive and continue to offend people at the current rate, I will have no friends within a century or so. I will have an army of enemies before a millennium or two has passed. Our greatest need is not that God give us an extension to this life but that he breaks this world and my life. I need him to remake it and me whole and perfect, as it ought to have been from the beginning, including my own dissolute life.

This is not a message which our world wants to hear and too many of our own parishioners will be uncomfortable with it, even if they hear it. The preacher has the unenviable task of being one of those Old Testament prophets today, the guys who were not ever popular. We pray for God to come and do more than a serious remodel on my life, we pray for him to deliver me from my sins. The problem is that my own sinful flesh is my own worst enemy. I am thoroughly enmeshed in this sinful world and in order for him to liberate me from my sins he has to kill me.

For the Christian, however, he can speak this unthinkable prayer because in his baptism something good has also happened. God has killed the old and raised up a new life, a Christ-like life, which is not part of this world and which will stand in the judgment and which will enjoy the blessing of heaven for ever. The revelation of the Christ on the last day is not only a revelation of a reality out there which I cannot see, it is also the revelation of myself, a reality which I often also have a hard time seeing. For on the day of my baptism a new person was born and that person is alive in the kingdom of Christ, obedient to his rule, a citizen of a realm which has no end. That person, that redeemed and renewed person, is perfect in God’s sight. Now he is cloaked and chained to this old sinner and he must do battle with the law that governs our members and this old sinful flesh. But on that last day, when the power of God is stirred up and he comes with his angelic hosts, we will no longer have to fight that battle. The old sinner will be dead, forever dead.

Now this last day message is not the sum total of what we have to preach. The power of God can also be exerted for the sinner today. This is the power of conversion; this is the Damascus Road power, the turn around which has marked so many a reprobate-turned-Christian. This is the woman whose diagnosis of terminal cancer was proved wrong. This is the persecuted Christians of the 4th century suddenly finding Constantine on the throne and the faith recently persecuted now practiced in the halls of power. This is experienced in all sorts of ways. Can you see any in your congregation?

The preacher will need to ask how we talk about the “threatening perils” of our sins in a way that makes sense to our folks. Do we need to re-universalize the reality of sin? How do we connect our condition to the sin word? Too often we so categorize the sin into the naughty column and we tend to see that this is taken care of in our baptism, our worship etc. but then we put the other problems, our exhaustion, our insecurity, our financial woes, etc., into another category and that is not a God problem and hence not one that he solves.

The proclamation of heaven can do this for us. We talk about heaven and remember that it is a perfect place, but that immediately reminds us that we are not perfect. We live forever in heaven but go to funerals on earth. We are perfectly healthy in heaven, but we are sick here. We are in perfect harmony with the world, the environment and our fellow human beings in heaven; here we are in conflict with each other, the environment and the world in which we live. Just holding up the perfect does this to the imperfect sinners. It highlights our shortcomings.

We are often so familiar with our sinfulness that we think it is normal. Abused women and children often will seek out partners and others who will repeat the abusive behavior because they are so used to it and they know no other way. It is normal to them. We also need to be shown that there is another way to live. It is a better way to be.

Readings

Isaiah 64:1-9

Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains might quake at your presence—
² 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!
³ When you did awesome things that we did not look for,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.
⁴ From of old no one has heard
or perceived by the ear,
no eye has seen a God besides you,
who acts for those who wait for him.
⁵ You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,
those who remember you in your ways.

Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?

⁶ 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.

⁷ There is no one who calls upon your name,
who rouses himself to take hold of you;
for you have hidden your face from us,
and have made us melt in the hand of our iniquities.

⁸ 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.

⁹ Be not so terribly angry, O LORD,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people.

¹⁰ *Your holy cities have become a wilderness;
Zion has become a wilderness,
Jerusalem a desolation.*

¹¹ *Our holy and beautiful house,
where our fathers praised you,
has been burned by fire,
and all our pleasant places have become ruins.*

¹² *Will you restrain yourself at these things, O LORD?
Will you keep silent, and afflict us so terribly?*

This text establishes the reader in the Advent posture. The preacher might simply take a walk through this text as the outline of his sermon. He starts with the bizarre prayer that God would come in power, mountains shaking, heavens rent asunder. But that is based on the faith expressed in the final verses. He acknowledges the fact that we are the people of God. We melt when he looks away. We are the clay, you are the potter, don't be terribly angry.

There is a great hymn which picks up on the first line of this reading: "O Savior, Rend the Heavens Wide." (LSB #355) It is in other hymnals and if you have a congregation who can sing it, it is a good one.

This portion of Isaiah, of course, has a great deal of imagery which lends itself to the preacher. In the first verses he speaks of the actions of God like a fire in a brushwood which boils the water. If you have had any experience with the wild fires in the west, you know what he is talking about there. This brushwood kindles and burns very quickly, releasing intense heat. He remembers when the nations spoke of the actions of God, especially the Exodus when waters parted and the armies of Egypt were cast into the sea. He remembered when the sun stood still for Joshua to fight the Canaanites and the walls of Jericho tumbled to the ground.

But now Isaiah wonders where God is. He seems to be quiet. People are in exile, in a strange and hostile land (the northern kingdom in the lifetime of Isaiah, the southern kingdom was ravaged at the time and many were surely also exiled.) The nation is humbled and they have labored long in their condition. He acknowledges that they deserve it, he acknowledges their sin, but he wonders how long this must last.

Our pericope ends with a prayer. Isaiah confesses that we are but the clay in the divine potter's hands. If we are to be anything, it must be because God has made us into something. (II Corinthians will pick up on this imagery.) Otherwise we are lost. Be not angry with us, he pleads. Make something of us, as you made of us long ago. The verses that follow this reading are something of a litany of the problems the people face. What would we put in there? Do we really look to God to be solution to those problems? Are we really ready to say that we are the clay in God's hands? Clay is so much dirt, so much shapeless, meaningless blobs without the work of the potter. It is his skill which makes the vase or the bowl or the plate which delights our eyes or holds our feast. This could be a great children's lesson, but it would require getting your hands dirty.

If we are not ready to be that clay, can we wonder why God seems to be so distant from our suffering sometimes. Until I am nothing, God makes nothing of me.

Psalm 80:1-7

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,

 you who lead Joseph like a flock.

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,

stir up your might

 and come to save us!

³ Restore us, O God;

 let your face shine, that we may be saved!

⁴ O LORD God of hosts,

 how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears

 and given them tears to drink in full measure.

⁶ You make us an object of contention for our neighbors,

 and our enemies laugh among themselves.

⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;

 let your face shine, that we may be saved!

We sing in this Psalm a prayer that God would stir up his might, the very words prayed in the collect of the day. God's might is stirred up to save us. Our salvation is God's face shining upon us. There are the words of our benediction which we hear at the end of many of our services. How long with the Lord of Hosts be angry? Lord of Hosts – that's YHWH Sabbaoth which is

what we sing in the Sanctus which most of our hymnals translate as “Lord of power and might” but it really means the Lord of the heavenly armies.

The repeated prayer is that God would restore. We accede his power – he is able. But we begin by noticing that God has led Joseph like a flock, Ephraim and Manasseh witness this. The order is important. We are able to categorize God’s power this way.

I Corinthians 1:3-9

Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes,

²To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, ⁵that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— ⁶even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— ⁷so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁸who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

We added the first verses into the text. The greeting from Sosthenes and Acts 18 suggests that Paul was very good, thanks to Christ, at reconciling with enemies. Think of what this meant to the Corinthians who were fighting with each other. Paul calls Sosthenes a brother. In Acts 18, Sosthenes tried to kill him, using the Roman judicial system. If you have ever been sued by someone, you know how personal these court issues can become. Later in our reading when Paul says they have all spiritual gifts, he knows of what he speaks and the power of that Spirit. It has made his mortal enemy a brother.

This section from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is a perfect match for the OT lesson today. Paul is casting the vision of what they can be in this first verses. They are rich because God has made them rich, he has ennobled them, made them wise and they have every necessary spiritual gift. They are guiltless to the end in Jesus. They are also the possessors of great spiritual gifts in Christ. The same forgiveness which has united Paul in the first verse to Sosthenes is also given fully and freely to them. They are rich in the very same things in which Paul is rich.

Of course as we read further we learn that the Corinthians were anything but what Paul was talking about. They were a congregation in deep conflict, with serious moral and theological problems. None of them were wise by worldly standards nor did it appear that they came from the wealthy and noble of the community. To anyone looking at them from the outside, they were not rich, but bankrupt in many ways. But in these verses, like Isaiah, Paul is not seeing the way things are but the way they can be in Christ and the way that they are in their baptism. Even the humblest little parish in Jesus has the makings of a great and powerful congregation of

believers. The key is not me, demographics, marketing, or something else of this world. The key is Jesus.

This is the essence of Advent. The preacher drawn to this text will preach the season as much as the text itself. Advent calls us to see the world for what is lacking, but also to see, in the same moment, that which God has promised and accomplished in Christ. Paul sees these broken and sinful people as the redeemed and holy people of God, gifted with every heavenly blessing.

Gospel Reading: The Gospel for this day presents us with an option. The tradition is that the season of Advent, the arrival of Christ, is the great arrival text of Palm Sunday. In prior years when the Palm Sunday text was always the reading from John, the individual gospels were read on this day. In more recent times the synoptic gospel accounts have asserted themselves on Palm Sunday. Thus the preacher might be tempted to go with the alternate reading and that would be a good one, especially in year B. This reading is a parallel to the text which we would have had on Reformation Day but which most of us did not read because we were reading the texts for the festival. This text asserts that Jesus' arrival will be a surprise.

If you are thinking of that Palm Sunday text, there is merit to that as well. The Palm Sunday story is enmeshed in the passions and the excitement of Holy Week. Many of us may have confirmation that day or some other celebrations or we may focus on the long passion reading which is also appointed for that day. Perhaps we have not preached the Palm Sunday narrative for some time and would do well to remember it. I treat them both and suggest a sermon on them both.

Mark 11:1-10

Now when they drew near to Jerusalem, to Bethphage and Bethany, at the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two of his disciples ² and said to them, "Go into the village in front of you, and immediately as you enter it you will find a colt tied, on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it. ³ If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' say, 'The Lord has need of it and will send it back here immediately.'" ⁴ And they went away and found a colt tied at a door outside in the street, and they untied it. ⁵ And some of those standing there said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" ⁶ And they told them what Jesus had said, and they let them go. ⁷ And they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it, and he sat on it. ⁸ And many spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut from the fields. ⁹ And those who went before and those who followed were shouting, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! ¹⁰ Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!"

¹¹ *And he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple. And when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve.*

This at first sounds terribly out of place in Advent as we are getting ready to celebrate Christmas. Isn't this more appropriate for spring and the Easter season? In one sense, yes, but not altogether inappropriate here. Advent is after all about the coming of Jesus, this is the great arrival story in the Bible as Jesus rides into Jerusalem to bear the sins of the whole world and to pay their price on Calvary's terrible cross. It is this Jesus whom we wait for today. Not a different Jesus. He will be in glory on that last day, not humble and riding on a donkey, but it is the same Jesus who once rode into Jerusalem on this donkey to the adulation of crowds.

The Gospel writers are all clear about this: Jesus has this all planned out. He even has arranged the donkey. This is a masterful stroke on Jesus' part. The Romans would not have perceived a threat, but would have simply seen another Jewish guy looking like an idiot on a donkey. (There is no noble way to ride a donkey) The Jews on the other hands would have taken a completely different message from it. Moses had warned the people about kings in Deut 17 and especially about kings and horses (Deut 17:16). It seems that David took that to heart. When he finally gets around to putting Solomon on the throne, they show it by having him ride the king's mule (I Kings 1:44). Apparently, cognizant of Moses' warnings about kings in Deuteronomy, David did not have a stately stallion to ride but a mule.

Jesus riding in on a donkey is conveying two very different messages to the various audiences. The Romans think it is just another Jewish peasant riding on a donkey, but the crowds and the Pharisees can read that message very differently. Jesus is making a statement about his kingship here, his kingdom. The Pharisees will fear it and kill him on Friday for it. The crowds will adore him for it on Palm Sunday.

It is their adoration which really needs our attention today. Look carefully at their words. They should be familiar. They are the second part of the Sanctus which the liturgy provides for us to sing just before the Eucharist. (You may want to re-read the Psalm and the notes – we get the first part of that Sanctus there). Now many who are eschewing the liturgy and singing praise songs this day won't get this connection and they are somewhat impoverished for it. For the preacher today has a great opportunity to put his parishioners in the crowds of Palm Sunday. We sing them just before we experience this same Jesus Christ in the Supper. He comes here today too and the same songs on our lips as were on their lips.

This is the marvel of worship. It transcends time and space. There is only one generation of hearers, we are all part of that first crowd, and we are all witnesses to that great Passover, that Passion of our Lord. As the Jews say in the Passover meal, "when we were in Egypt." Never when our fathers were in Egypt, but it is always we who are there. For Christians, it is always, "When I cried Hosanna!" it is not when they cried Hosanna, but when I cried Hosanna and Jesus came to take away the sins of the world.

This is the true Advent story. It is not about getting ready for Santa to come, it is about the arrival, the ongoing arrival and the ultimate arrival of that Jesus who brings not the gift of a curved screen 50" LCD HDTV but the gift of eternal life.

Mark 13:24-37

²⁴ “But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, ²⁵ and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. ²⁶ And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. ²⁷ And then he will send out the angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

²⁸ “From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near. ²⁹ So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. ³⁰ Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. ³¹ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

³² “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³³ Be on guard, keep awake. For you do not know when the time will come. ³⁴ It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to stay awake. ³⁵ Therefore stay awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning— ³⁶ lest he come suddenly and find you asleep. ³⁷ And what I say to you I say to all: Stay awake.”

Does this sound a little familiar? It should. This is essentially Mark’s version of the Matthew 24 text we would have had a few weeks ago when Jesus said that he is coming like a thief in the night and no one knows the time or hour. You might not remember it because Reformation probably displaced that reading. It fell on the Sunday prior to Reformation day. (We heard a similar message repeated in the parable of the Ten Virgins.) The exhortation to wakefulness is the same. The parable of the servant who is doing his job is worthy of note. We just don’t know how long this tired old world will stand as it is, but right now we have a job. What is that job? That might be a discussion worth having on Tuesday.

Is not our job to see the signs around us and act? Jesus has forgiven the sins of the world, the signs have been given, the absolution has been pronounced, and the command has been uttered. We need to notice these things. Our servant task is not that complex. We are charged to make disciples, to preach in season and out of season. The time is now. Jesus words’ will stand forever, until the very end of time. He wants to find us doing this when he comes.

Law

1. God often seems distant to us, especially when times are tough. Like many we are tempted to ask where this good God is on evil days.
2. But if he seems to be distant, the real question is who has moved. His distance from us is not for his lack of care or concern or effort. Our own stubborn humanity has too often closed our ears and eyes and minds and hearts to his gracious calling. The muting of his voice is more due to the stopping of our ears than his whispering.

3. Our world has convinced us that our sin problem is narrowly defined by our morality. It is as if we are naughty, and God has taken care of that, but he has not touched our real problems of insecurity, of death, of sickness, etc.
4. We have often failed to live up to the promise which is ours, but have instead lived down to our sinful reality. We have acted as if we are doomed to this world and there is nothing to be done. We have not seen the potential which Christ expresses for us in his presence.
5. But there is reason for that. we are just so inept. We can take a good thing and ruin it. We are like the shapeless clay which the man digs from his field. If you have ever had a garden in clay you know what a pain it is really is. It is heavy and hard to work. Most of the time too wet to tolerate much tilling and when it dries out it gets as hard as a rock.

Gospel

1. God has come right here today. This sacrament, this Word, this absolution are all moments of his glorious kingdom breaking into our lives. We are getting ready to celebrate the incarnation in the Christmastide. This is the celebration of God being “Emmanuel” with us!
2. And so he gets right up to the closed ears and shouts once in a while. He puts a foot out in front of us when we close our eyes and he makes us fall so we have to open them. He melts the stubborn heart and pries open the closed mind. Not just to open these things but to speak his marvelous words of love and peace.
3. The ministry and death of Jesus expand our definition of sin to include all of its effects and the problems which we endure. Jesus died for my empty retirement account as much as he died for my lies and moral problems. His salvation is applied to my death, to my sicknesses, to my fears, as much as it is applied to my naughtiness.
4. And thus no Christian can ever say that he or she is alone. Jesus is with us, and that changes everything. No enemy is greater than my friend. No problem is too big, no shortage is too dire. His wealth, his blessing, his gift is always enough for his people. That means my life is marked by hope.
5. That is good because I am like clay. In the hands of a craftsman potter, the clay which is the farmer’s bane becomes the object of utility and beauty which is valued and prized.

Sermon Ideas

1. Hosanna in the Highest! (That the hearer would believe that Jesus comes in Word and Sacrament to his/her life today, bringing with him the gifts of the Spirit and the wealth of heaven for good of his Kingdom and his subjects)

Paul ends his letter to the Corinthians with the term “Maranatha” which is an Aramaic phrase and means “Come, O Lord.” We thought it might make an alternate title to this. Paul’s words to the Corinthians at the end of the book we start today are our words too.

We pray for the eyes of faith to see the Christ we don't physically see right now but confess to be here with us.

This sermon might serve to restore the eschatological element to the Advent season for us. The people of early Christianity seemed to come to church every week with the idea that this might be the day when Jesus shows up. And they prayed for that. What is more, this Aramaic prayer would have been in another language than the audience knew. This is something that the Christian congregations in Palestine probably prayed and the folks in Corinth joined them. This seems to have been quite prevalent in the ancient church. (Read Larry Hurtado's "Lord, Jesus Christ" for a fuller discussion of this.)

When we sing the words in the liturgy something happens to us. God, the master of time and space, breaks down the barriers which separate us from the events of our Bible and we find ourselves on the dusty streets of first century Jerusalem, more importantly, we find ourselves watching Jesus come into this place. These words seem to belong in Easter, but every Sunday is a little Easter and every worship experience is a moment for Jesus of Nazareth to speak to us. We pick up our figurative palm frond today and sing his welcome song because he is really here with us, humble, in a wafer and wine, in the words of this guy who wears the funny clothes up front, in the fellowship of our fellow believers. He is here to bless us. The eyes of the world see only another crazy bunch of Christians today. But the eyes of faith, the eyes of God's people, see something more. They see that Christ comes, they sing his song and they rejoice in his presence. He brings with him the gifts which we need, the blessings we must have. Because he is here, we have them!

2. Clay in his hands (OT – That the hearer, fears calmed by God's gracious promise, would eagerly anticipate God's good work in his/her life.)

We want to pick up on the imagery of the end of the OT reading today. Jesus comes, but what exactly he is about is somewhat obscure for us sometimes. The world dreads it, for it can only see change negatively. It is a death. The lump of clay does not enjoy the potter's attention. Getting squeezed, pinched, spun in a circle, and fired in a kiln cannot be pleasant.

The whole text needs to be addressed here. Isaiah prays that God would rend the heavens and come in power. He then goes on to say that we have a serious problem. Our sins have made us miserable. We are like leaves that blow away in the wind. We are like clay that sticks to your shoes. Not good for much. But Isaiah appeals to God's ancient work, his creation work. We are the product of his handiwork.

Look up the word Integrity – it means without wax –potters would cover up defects in pottery with wax, but these were not as strong as a pottery without defects. To have integrity means without wax. (<https://www.charismamag.com/site-archives/557-charisma-channels/men/8168-integrity-is-king> another website: <https://techcrunch.com/2015/08/27/brands-without-wax/>)

God's people eagerly anticipate [God's arrival which might be strange](#). We can do that because the potter has holes in his hands and feet which he bears because this is not his first coming. Advent helps us see that. We stand before the Christmas-tide and before the Eschaton today. In one we will celebrate the birth of Christ, humble and poor, laid in a manger. He will get his hands dirty as a craftsman. We often call him a carpenter but in truth the term in Greek is a "techton" which is someone who makes stuff, usually a carpenter or a stone mason or even a potter.

Clay is not in its native state a terribly useful stuff. If you garden it is a pain to work with. If you are trying build a house on it, it expands and contracts sometimes and cracks your foundation. Clay sticks to your boots and shoes. It is really miserable stuff, until you put a lump of clay into the hands of a potter, someone who has the wheel and the kiln and the skill to make something beautiful. Then clay becomes the raw material of something beautiful, useful, and good.

We are the clay, God is the potter!

Today the potter has arrived and in this meal is working his great transformation of our lives, turning us from the worthless clay which sticks to the farmers' boots into the work of art that is fit for heaven. Advent will not let us stay complacent in our sins. It challenges us to recognize and repent of this life we have lived. It has a great need of reformation. (semper reformandum)

The preacher will want to have some illustration of this at work, he cannot simply assert it but he must also put skin on this assertion. He needs a story. There are many reformation stories one could tell. Paul himself is a great one. You could mine the story of Sosthenes out of the Epistle reading's sermon below. You might look to the people of your own congregation and community and point their eyes to God doing this in their very midst. This can be tough because sometimes people also know the faults of the folks who are close to them very well. When it is done right however, it can give a potent witness to God's love. He doesn't just use good and perfect folks, in truth, he just uses people.

Children's sermon idea: bring in a lump of potter's clay and the finished product, a vase, a pot, something beautiful and contrast them for the kids. This is what Jesus is doing here today. He is taking broken, clay like people. If you are a gardener you are aware of this reality, clay is hard to farm and tends to stick to the bottom of your boots when walk in your garden. Clay tends to Clay is not good stuff unless the potter gets his hands on it.

[Here is a video clip of someone who does this at Eureka Springs where there is a passion play. Parables of the Potter is available on YouTube.](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsFfCjeiqcl>

[Another good reference is the II Corinthians passage which speaks of God's treasures in pots of clay \(II Corinthians 4:7\). The preacher would of course also want to reference the](#)

first instance of God as a potter in the creation story. Isaiah seems to be doing that by appealing to God as creator.

3. Waiting like a Waiter (That the hearer would take to heart the admonition of Jesus to wait for his coming by attending to the task which he has given us.)

There is a funny thing that happens to people when they think the end of the world is near. They tend to sell their possessions and act as if they are no longer part of the world. In the 1830's thousands of people did this in response to a man named Miller who claimed the world would end one day, first in the spring of 1843 and then again in the fall of that year. They sold all, gathered together, prayed, and waited, and, of course, nothing happened. Miller recalculated and said he had been off by a little, but only by one year. So many of them waited again. Again, nothing happened.

Finally they gave up on old farmer Miller. But a group of them decided that he had been right but while Jesus had come they could not see him because we were not following the rules correctly, especially the dietary and Sabbath rules of the Old Testament. They became strict vegetarians and insisted on worship on Saturday and came to be known as the Seventh Day Adventists. Because they could not eat meat for breakfast anymore, an enterprising Adventist decided to explore various grain products for breakfast. His name was Kellogg and you probably ate some of his cereal this morning.

But this sort waiting is not the waiting that God has in mind. I would like to propose that our waiting is much more like a waiter, who serves my table at a restaurant. He is waiting on tables, but that is not a passive gazing into the sky but a real activity, a real thing to do. What has Jesus given us to do? Has he not filled our hearts with love, enriched us with gifts, given us a mission? Is not the perfect waiting when one teaches a child, forgives a sinner, loves a neighbor, feeds a hungry man or helps a poor woman? Is not this the good and faithful servant whom the master will delight in upon his return? This is not just the heroic nor the special service either. Simply taking care of your children, buying the groceries, voting, and cleaning the house are all the waiting of this servant.

In this way, oddly, the Kingdom does come right now, but it comes humbly, the first coming sort of Kingdom. It looks more like the Jesus in the manger whose birth we celebrate in a few weeks. That is the kingdom of today, the servant king is our leader, the guy who walked Palestine's dusty roads. But we also look forward to another coming of Christ on the last day. We do await that arrival. On that last day, he will come again in glory, no longer the humble carpenter, but the glorious king of all. He will be the same Jesus and yet different. That is the day our mission changes, but we will still be waiters who love our neighbor and serve them. Until then, we are loving servants of the king in this broken work, bearing his mark in our lives and living as the invitations to our fellow human being to be part of this kingdom of waiters. We look like him in his service, in his love, in his humility. On that day, we will also love but we will look like him in his glory.

4. We lack no gift (Epistle: That the hearer would employ the gifts which God has given us for the service of God's Kingdom in this place.)

Paul forgave his mortal enemy, Sosthenes. That is a pretty huge event if you think about it, and it took something which was bigger even than a great man like Paul. It took Jesus in his life.

Paul writes to a congregation which is really struggling. They are fighting, they are suing each other, they have gross problems of immorality, and worship is a complete zoo! Yet Paul calls them and us rich. We are rich with them because God has poured the same forgiveness, Spirit, Love, and more which God poured into us in Baptism which he poured into them.

Advent reminds us that this world is dying. There is no bandage which will make this thing better. We won't be able to fix this by keeping the rules, following the steps, or otherwise getting it right, even if we could. The mortal blow dealt to this world by sin is not repairable by its own inhabitants. The OT reading really develops this well, consider using it. It looks like we too are impoverished and totally lost. Indeed we would be of ourselves.

But Advent also looks forward and backward to the arrival of Jesus. We look back to the time he came in humility to fix this world by his death on a cross and his resurrection on Easter morning. We look ahead to the day when he will come again in glory to reveal all that he has done. In the meantime, we wait, as Paul says. We wait but we know we are rich. With one eye cast back on what Jesus did, we know the love of God. With one eye cast forward to the day of his revelation, we know that this broken world will one day pass. We are rich.

That wealth empowers our lives today. We can live in the same forgiveness which Paul used on Sosthenes because we know the end of this story. Every sin is forgiven. We can reconcile with our enemies because we know the love which prayed for enemies from a cross and which turned even persecuting Saul around on a road to Damascus.