

Follow Me

The First Sunday in Advent

December 3, 2023

Matthew 21:1–9

What was the first word Jesus spoke when He began his ministry? Repent. In the first of his 95 theses Martin Luther said, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Jesus came into His ministry with the call to repent. As He made His way through His ministry He had His sights set on the cross. He knew where He was going. In connection with telling His disciples that He would suffer, die, and rise, He said, “Whoever desires to come after Me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me.” This is what we have already prayed for in the Introit: “Make me to know Your ways, O Lord; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation.” Let’s take to heart our prayer and talk about what it means to follow Jesus.

The Church Year helps us. Today we begin the Church Year. It starts with the season of Advent, which is a season of preparation. We are preparing for our celebration of Jesus coming in the first place, at Bethlehem, being born of the Virgin. But we also cast an eye ahead, looking to that day when He will return in glory. We prepare to celebrate and rejoice in His coming back then and His coming still to come. Thus Advent is a time for us for reflection and repentance.

Jesus said, “Follow Me.” This is why we have the Church Year. The Church Year takes us through the life of Christ. It directs our attention to Him and what He has done for us. When we go through the Church Year we are following the events of His life, what He did to bring about salvation. In this way we are learning how to follow Him in our individual lives and together as the Body of Christ.

The Church Year begins with somewhat of a jolt, the Gospel reading showing us Jesus going into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. This centers us from the start. This is where following Him leads. All those who followed Him were rejoicing that He was entering Jerusalem. They were glad to follow Him into the city on that day. But He knew why He was entering the city. He would be betrayed and arrested and tortured and then He would be crucified. No one could follow Him to the cross. He would bear the suffering of the cross alone.

The triumphal entry of Christ starts us on the right path. We tend to follow our own way. Even our attempts at following Jesus end up being more like following our own ideas or desires or even the ways of the world. With sincere intention we might ask, What would Jesus do? We may be convinced that we should be more like Jesus. But we cannot be like Him any more than we can do what He did. Our attempts to do so fall flat. Our reliance on them become idolatrous. He is pure and holy. He is selfless and self-sacrificing. We too often are full of ourselves and impure. He came not to set an example but to save us.

Jesus came in humility. But make no mistake, He was firmly in control in all He did. As He was about to enter the city He directs two of His disciples to go to a nearby village to bring back a donkey. What if the person who owns it asks them why they are untying the donkey? They are to tell the person, “The Lord needs it.” The person will then allow them to take it. Perhaps Jesus had arranged this all before. Maybe this is yet another miracle He would accomplish. The point

is that Jesus is in control of everything. He is purposely going to enter Jerusalem knowing that it will mean that He will suffer death.

When the disciples bring the donkey to Jesus they laid their cloaks on it and some people laid their cloaks on the road. This is a procession, some of the people in the crowd are going before Him and others are following Him into Jerusalem. What is the source of their celebration? They had witnessed the miracles Jesus had performed for over three years. They had heard His teaching. They had seen Him emerge unscathed by the religious leaders who had sought to bring Him down. They had come to enjoy the ministry of Jesus and all that He had done.

Now here's the question. Did they know who Jesus was? Did they really believe in Him as the Savior promised in the Old Testament? Because they sure were happy that He was entering Jerusalem on that day. They hailed Him: Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! It appears they knew who He was. In His coming into Jerusalem they were expecting Him to fulfill His work as the Messiah, the Savior promised in the Old Testament.

But here's the next question. Did they know what that meant? No, not really. Were they looking for one who would deliver them from the Roman Empire's occupation of their land? Were they looking for a bread king, one who would be able to feed them miraculously from then on out, so that they'd never go hungry again and who could also heal their many diseases? Could it be that they were actually looking for Him to deliver them from their sins? Maybe. What's clear is that they didn't know what it meant that He was coming to be their deliverer, their Savior. Their expectations of Him did not fit with Him submitting to death on a cross.

Jesus came in humility. The path Jesus sets us on is the path of humility. He goes this path before us, we follow Him. He shows us this in coming in on a donkey. The donkey is a lowly pack animal. It is there to do the grunt work. It doesn't complain, it just keeps going forward. Jesus came in humility. He is the Lord of all but came to serve, to offer even His own life for us. He came not on a majestic horse but on a lowly animal, a donkey.

This is how it all begins, then, for us at the beginning of the Church Year. We are blessed to be able to follow the Church Year and are blessed through it. Each week we gather here we are re-centered, grounded once again in the life of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ. We need this. We wouldn't think of giving up our daily needs of food and sleep and companionship anymore than we should think of going without being here each week. We need this, to be here, to follow our Lord. We need to be forgiven, to be strengthened, to be re-centered.

This is vital. But it's also clear that following Jesus means more than just being here in church. Following Him means living a life of repentance. The apostle Paul shows what this life looks like in the Epistle reading. Walk with decency, not in carousing and drunkenness. Are there areas of your life where you live in excess, where you indulge in sinful behavior and cannot restrain yourself? He speaks further against sexual impurity and promiscuity. Are you actively engaging in sexual impurity and promiscuity instead of reserving sexual intimacy for the bonds of marriage? Do your lustful thoughts betray the adultery that is in your mind? Paul also cautions against quarreling and jealousy. Do you devolve into this kind of pettiness instead of seeking first to live in peace with others? Following Jesus means self-control, purity, selflessness.

Beginning the Church Year with the account of Palm Sunday we are on the cusp of the cross. You follow Jesus, but you will not be going to the cross. He has already suffered on the cross. But you will take up your cross. Following Jesus means you will be battling your sinful nature every day. Do not try to be like Him or try to determine what He would do. Paul says in the Epistle, "Put on the armor of light." Your Lord has called you to follow Him and like a soldier arrayed for battle, you are protected with heavenly armor. Even more, Paul says, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ"! In telling you to clothe yourself with Jesus Himself Paul is using baptismal language in a similar way he does in Galatians 3. Live in your Baptism, live in Christ. Daily die to your sin in sorrow over it and repent of it. Turn from your sin and live in Christ.

Following Jesus first means following Him in His life here through the Church Year and in hearing His Word proclaimed and receiving His body and blood in His Sacrament. Following Him through His life is at the heart of following Him in your own life. Here you will be brought back again and again to your Lord who has gone ahead of you into death and resurrection all the way to eternal life. Amen.

SDG

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