

Today we start another year in the Church, another year of anticipating our Lord's coming. That's what Advent means, after all: "coming."

Now, how do you know if someone is coming to visit you? Most of the time, it's because they've told you; they've given their word. Depending on what you think of the person, and especially how much you trust their word, you'll prepare and anticipate their arrival very differently.

If it's someone whose word you don't trust, someone who always says they'll be there but then they no-show or cancel at the last minute, you probably won't waste too much time and effort getting ready.

If it's someone who you know to tell the truth, but also someone you don't care for a whole lot, you might get ready, but you'll probably spend more time worrying or trying to think up excuses to cancel.

But if it's someone you trust, and someone you enjoy being around, even love, then you'll eagerly look forward to that person's coming, and you'll prepare with gladness and anticipation.

Throughout the Scriptures, the Lord gives His Word to His people that He is coming, coming to comfort, coming to save, coming to reign. We who love the Lord look forward to this coming, this Advent, because the Word of our Lord never fails.

This Word lets us know that our Lord is coming, even if it doesn't seem like it to us. In our Gospel text, Matthew points out that Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem was a fulfillment of the word spoken by the prophet. That prophet, specifically Zechariah, had proclaimed, "Behold, your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a beast of burden."

The fulfillment of this was pretty obvious there on the first Palm Sunday, as Jesus did exactly what was foretold – the King of Kings riding into Jerusalem on a donkey accompanied by her foal. The thing is, though, Zechariah spoke these words over five hundred years before that day. What were the original hearers of this Word of the Lord supposed to do with it?

Zechariah tells them to "behold," to "look, see" that their king is coming. But what do they see as they look around? They see a city that's mostly rubble, whose demolished walls leave them open to attack from all their hostile neighbors. They see a temple whose reconstruction has started but has hit some delays, and even when finished will look nothing like the beautiful building of Solomon. They can't see their earthly king, as they're ruled by the Persian emperor Darius, who is far away in his great capitol.

It sure doesn't look like any descendant of David is coming on a humble donkey. And note, Zechariah doesn't say that their king "will come," but that He "is coming," even then, at that time. What do they make of this word?

We find ourselves in a very similar situation to those ancient people of Judah. Our God has promised to come to us. He has said that He will return to deliver us from all sin and death, to take

away our sorrow and replace it with joy, to rule over all the world. And it's not just that these things will happen, but the Bible tells us that Christ is doing all this, even now, at this time.

But what do we see when we look around? Sickness and death still appear to hold sway over all people, even Christians. Our hearts are still afflicted with anxiety, sadness, and fear. Our rulers are not righteous and holy, but sinful and corrupt, with even those who bear the name Christian often using their authority in direct opposition to God's commandments. Even when we look at the Christian Church, where Jesus is openly said to be King, it is stricken by conflict and strife.

God tells us in His Word that He is ruling and reigning over all things, but it doesn't appear that way to our eyes. What then do we make of God's promises? How are we to take God's Word?

As time goes on, our faith in God's Word can begin to wane. It can be weakened or distorted as we look more to ourselves and our own ideas to square things and less to the clear words of Scripture and simply trusting what they say.

As the centuries passed after Zechariah prophesied, the people of Judah continued to hold onto the idea of a coming King, a Messiah sent by God to deliver them. However, their own ideas began to creep in and warp this hope in what God has promised.

They looked for a Savior, but their idea of a savior was one who would save them from the Romans, their hated pagan overlords, and restore a physical kingdom where they would reign in earthly power and splendor. Deliverance from sin became their own task, earned through obedience.

They remembered that this Messiah would be the Son of David, as God had made that very clear to David, but they forgot those words spoken through David that the Messiah would also be David's Lord. Thus they thought the Messiah would just be a man, not God Himself, for God grew increasingly distant as more rules and regulations were put between Him and His people by the scribes and Pharisees.

They said that the Messiah would come in the name of the Lord, but that became their excuse to claim whatever they want about the Messiah and then put the stamp of God's name on their human inventions.

And so as the crowds cry out, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!," you have to wonder how many people actually understand what they're saying. How many of them truly know the Word of the Lord, and how many are just spouting off the popular phrases of the times?

The things of God being put to popular use is nothing foreign to our times. For a prime example look no further than the approaching holiday of Christmas.

Many people will say "Merry Christmas" but have no actual belief in who the Christ is and why He came as a baby two thousand years ago, much less an intention to go to mass – that is, worship service – on Christmas Day.

Decorations of holly and evergreen and lights will be put up everywhere, but few people will do this thinking of them representing Christ as the life and light in a world of death and darkness.

Santa Claus has become a fat guy in a red suit who pushes materialism rather than the pious remembrance of St. Nicholas, a pastor and bishop who showed God's love to people in need, including providing dowries to young women so that they could get married and raise families.

Now it's easy to rag on the world outside of these walls, but we Christians are tempted to such ignorance of God's word ourselves. We're in Advent, a season where we are anticipating the coming of Christ. Do we live in such a manner?

Do we wait for our Lord's deliverance with patience, enduring trials and suffering as He did, or do we seek out what we want when we want it, doing what feels good and casually assuming that, because Jesus loves us, it's all okay?

Do we strive to shine the light of the Gospel into the world, understanding and even embracing the fact that we will be different as we conform ourselves to God's Word, or do we follow in the footsteps of those ancient Israelites, gradually letting the influence of the world into our homes, into our worship, into our hearts until we appear no different than the pagans around us?

When we sing the part of the liturgy that comes in part from today's reading, the Sanctus, do we truly believe that the Ascended God and Lord Christ is coming down out of heaven to physically dwell in our midst and let us partake of His divine life and light, or is it just another page to turn through before we can head home and do what we actual enjoy doing?

God's Word and God's promises are unshakable, but our sinful nature loves to twist and corrupt them, taking the parts that we like and tossing what we don't.

God be praised, though, that our sin does not negate His faithfulness. Jesus comes to His people as their true and eternal king that first Palm Sunday.

He comes humble and mounted on a donkey, just as His prophet Zechariah had foretold. He comes, despite the fact that no one in Jerusalem rightly understands what He's actually there to do. He comes, even as He knows that before the week is over He'll be hanging on a cross outside that same city. He comes because He has given His people His word, spoken to them in love.

He is the true king, and He is there not to conquer the Romans but rather the greater enemies of sin, death, and the devil.

He is the Son of David, coming to reign not over a small patch of land next to the Mediterranean Sea but over a kingdom that transcends peoples and nations and time itself.

He comes in the name of the Lord because He is the Lord, Yahweh, the one true God together with His Father and the Holy Spirit.

Is any of this visible to those crowds shouting out to Him as He rides the donkey? No. But it is the reality of what is happening, just as God's word had said.

Still today, and always, God's word speaks of the true reality of what is happening. His Word tells you that, in your Baptism, you were clothed in Christ's own righteousness and sealed with His name, even if your eyes can't see those things.

It says that the Lord's Supper is truly the body and blood of Jesus, containing the life of God and the forgiveness of sins, and that the angels and archangels and all the company of heaven truly are gathered around the altar with us, even if your senses tell you otherwise.

Jesus, the King of Kings, truly is ruling and reigning over all things, guiding all that happens in the world for the sake of His Church. God's Word tells us in Hebrews that the Father has put everything in subjection to the Son, leaving nothing outside His control. This is true even, as it says there, "at present, we do not yet see everything in subjection to Him."

We cannot behold all this with our physical eyes, but we are given a great gift by Christ that does let us see such things: faith. As the Scriptures say, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

When Zechariah called on the people to behold that their king is coming, they were not able to see Jesus physically riding a donkey. But faith let them behold the reality that He was coming, that His plan to save them was in motion, that His Word was true even at that moment.

Likewise, faith lets us behold our Lord and King. The eyes of faith let us see our Lord on our altar in His Supper. The ears of faith let us hear the Absolution and reading of Scripture and preaching of the Gospel as actually coming from the mouth of the Lord. The heart and mind of faith let us know that Jesus is King, ruling over the nations and turning all things to good, even those things which appear to be bad to our human reason and senses.

By faith, we can perceive that the Kingdom of God is constantly growing, as the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the Gospel and the washing of Holy Baptism to bring countless souls around the globe into the light. Through faith, we see that even death is turned by the Almighty into the doorway through which the saints enter into His glorious presence.

As we wait for our Lord's coming, we wait with this divine gift of faith. Our Lord has promised in His word that He is even now on His way. He has never yet broken a promise; He has never yet failed to come to His people.

In this Advent season, we wait and prepare with gladness, for by faith in His Word we behold that our King is coming.

In His holy name, amen.