

## Sermon for Ad Te Levavi (Advent I) – Matthew 21:1-9

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some of the best stories begin with the ending. In some fiction books, the author begins the book with an intriguing scene leaving the reader wondering, “How did it get to this point?” or “Why is this happening?” Subsequent chapters explain the background and build up to that initial opening scene. This same concept has worked in movies as well. Think about how many movies today begin with an intense or exciting spectacle which captivates the viewer and leaves him wondering, “What happened?” and “What lead up to this point?” The rest of the plot unfolds the details that were so prominently shown in the beginning.

Some of the best stories begin with the ending. But don't imagine for a minute that modern mystery writers and Hollywood directors invented this literary technique. In fact, beginning stories at the end goes back to the Holy Scripture itself. How many times has a prophecy or “picture of the end” introduced the account and built up to the ending? Take the account of Jacob and his sons. Jacob's young son Joseph had two dreams. The first showed all 11 of Joseph's brothers bowing down before him. The next vision was similar, but included his mother and father also bowing down before him. What great disrespect would have been attributed to Joseph for these dreams! How was this going to happen? How would a father and his sons bow to one of the youngest sons? Even the casual observer can realize that after his subsequent sale into Egyptian slavery and then rise to power in Pharaoh's house, all people would bow before him, including father and brothers. The beginning visions make sense after the events unfold for Jacob's young son.

Take the case of Saint Peter. The Lord gave him His final instructions before sending him out to be a new pastor. “Feed my sheep. Truly, truly, I say to you, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go ... and after saying this He said to Him, “Follow me.” This was probably not the most uplifting message to hear for Peter. “You will stretch out your hands” and “another ... will carry you where you do not want to go.” The beginning of Peter's pastorate starts with the end: that he would be crucified for the sake of confessing Christ, as history tells us.

So today begins the new church year. Happy New Year! But the beginning doesn't start at the beginning, not in terms of the Gospel reading. If Christ is the center of our worship (the Beginning and the End) and if the church year was to start at the beginning, you would think that we would start with a Gospel reading from the birth of Christ. You'd think the church year would start with a genealogy of Jesus. You'd think the church year would begin with a prophecy by John the Baptizer preparing the way for the Lord. Nope. This is a story that begins near the end. Jesus is entering Jerusalem being hailed as the Son of David and the One who comes in the Name of the Lord. The Lord's triumphal entry into the Holy City foreshows His death.

Prestigious kings in the first century showed their might and valor by triumphal entries into cities. Jerusalem was probably used to this fanfare. A king would enter riding in a chariot pulled by a noble steed or valiant warhorse. He would be accompanied by a display of soldiers on horseback. They would prance about pompously. The earthly king would enter through the main gate of the city so that all the people would see him. The people desired this kingly hero.

But on that day, a King entered Jerusalem whose Kingdom was not of this world. Did He ride a magnificent horse? No, only a common donkey. Did He enter through the main city gate for all to see? No, He entered the temple gate, the most direct route to where the sacrifices took place, the sacrifices which foreshadowed the ultimate sacrifice He would fulfill. At His birth, was He placed in a cradle made of gold? No, a manger used to feed animals. Did He grow up in a royal city? No, the city of Nazareth, of which nothing ever good had come. Humility was the very mark of Christ the King.

This King named Christ did not please the people. They wanted a king who would give security and earthly goods to them. They were a people who faced sickness, temptation, and many other crosses. They wanted immediate relief from their afflictions. Have you ever thought, "If Christ really does love me, why doesn't He rescue me from crosses or bring me riches and honor?" or "Am I still really loved by God if He lets me be sad and suffer?" or "Doesn't He have the power to help me?"

The King and His Kingdom are more than this world. He prepares you, even now, for His eternal heavenly kingdom. Christ did not enter Jerusalem to capture the people by force. He captured His people by His compassion. Christ conquered in His Kingdom, not by a sword shedding blood, but by giving his holy and precious Body and Blood for the life of the world.

Paul Gerhardt, a noted 17<sup>th</sup> century Lutheran pastor in Germany, gives some commentary into the deep paradox of the start of the Advent season in a hymn we sang earlier: "O Lord, How Shall I meet You, how welcome you aright? Your people long to greet You, my hope, my heart's delight! O kindle, Lord most holy, Your lamp within my breast to do in spirit lowly all that may please you best. Your Zion strews before You green boughs and fairest palms; and I too will adore You with joyous songs and psalms." Often, you may consider Advent to be the waiting of Christ to enter the world as a little baby at Christmas time. This is true. Still, another important aspect deserves our attention. Why was this child born? To save sinners. Notice how Gerhardt (and the church year) draws imagery of "green boughs and fairest palms," a verbal picture of Christ's ride into Zion to die. As the church year unfolds the mystery is explained. The best story of all begins with the ending.

The best story is better than the dreams of Joseph or the pastorate of St. Peter. The best story begins with the promise of a male offspring crushing the head of the serpent. It ended when Christ destroyed death forever. The best story starts with a child born unto us and unto us a son is given. The best story starts with promise of the Lord: "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on Me, he also will live because of Me." The story is fulfilled when you partake of the Supper which Christ gives. The best story starts when this same Jesus promised "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to Myself." And when He was raised up on the cross He drew all people to Himself. And He still does today. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠