

First Sunday in Advent

Oh Come Emmanuel: The Gift of Baptism

Genesis 6:1-3, 5-14, 17-22

12/3/17

Grace and peace be yours in abundance through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord. (2 Pt 1:2)

Genesis 6:1-3, 5-14, 17-22

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Advent is a good season, a necessary season, for us in our Christian lives. It's so easy to just kind of float through life. The days fly by so quickly. I mean, it's already December 3rd, where did the year go? But then Advent gives us a chance, forces us to step back and take inventory of our lives. Advent is a season of waiting, of preparation, of repentance, and of preparing for Jesus' coming. From the theme today you see the main coming of Jesus that we are to focus on during Advent – Jesus' coming again on the Last Day. Just as Jesus came the first time, you can be sure he will keep his promise and come again. But the second coming is different than the first. Jesus came the first time to save, he came to pay the price for sin with his own life given on the cross. When he comes again, it will be to judge. That's why, in the Gospel this morning, in a lesson which emphasizes the unknown timing of his return, Jesus warned us, **"If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping"** (Mark 13:36). As we look forward to Jesus' coming, he wants us to be prepared.

It has been said many times, *"If you don't learn from history you are doomed to repeat it."* In much the same way, as we prepare for Jesus' return. Jesus himself directs us back to another judgment of God – the flood. In Matthew 24, Jesus compares his coming in judgment to the time before the flood. **"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man"** (Matthew 24:36-39).

The flood, then, is a reminder that Jesus' return will mean judgment. And, look again at the situation God saw, **"The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."** How could God not act? In one sentence God writes a novel of wholesale shamefulness, of the hideous face of the human heart, of the brutal movements of men toward one another. God's emphasis on the total depravity of the entire human race is devastatingly forceful.

God had to act. He had to act because the wickedness of the entire world threatened his promise. God had promised to send a Savior to take away sin, to restore fallen humanity to God's grace and love. That promise was threatened by how wicked the world had become. God had to act to save what few of his children were left. The flood was as much an act of *love* and *mercy* as it was an act of *judgment*. The flood was an act of *saving* as much as it was an act of *punishment*.

The judgment, the punishment, of the flood is very plain. **"The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the LORD said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created** (Can you feel God's pain there? He created mankind to enjoy his love and fellowship, but

they had turned away from him, they had scorned his love.) **whom I have created, from the face of the earth”**. Even so, God still showed mercy to his fallen people. God said, **“his days will be a hundred and twenty years.”** God, in his mercy, determined to give the people of the world time – 120 years – to hear his Word and be brought to faith. God’s love always trumps his judgment. But, when in sinful unbelief the people of the world refused his love, then his judgment came.

The parallels between the time of the flood and the coming return of Jesus in judgment are striking. We are currently living in the final 120 years, or however long God has decided, before he brings the world to an end.

So, the end will come. Jesus will return. He will come to judge. Does God see anything different when he looks at the world now than at the time of the flood? Our society is certainly still corrupt. Our world is still full of wickedness. But that’s not really the point. More importantly, where will you stand when he comes? Have you ever thought about that? That’s a scary thought, isn’t it? Listen to how that judgment is described in Revelation: **“And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened...The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done”** (Revelation 20:12,13).

When God looks at your record in the books, could his verdict be any different than at the time of the flood? **“The LORD saw how great [your] wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of [your] heart was only evil all the time.”** The total corruption of mankind has not changed, you and me included.

Lately, the accusations of sexual misconduct against politicians, actors, newscasters – anyone in the public eye – have been coming out all over the place. It seems like every day another person is brought down by their own actions. This last week, another public figure went down. I heard one of his coworkers say she couldn’t believe someone she worked with would be capable of something so horrible.

Why not? The capacity of mankind for evil knows no bounds! I know, because sin lives in me, too. Sin is ugly business. We tend to focus on actions. But sin goes much deeper than that. You see that from God’s description of the sin at the time of the flood: **“every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.”** Sin is, first and foremost, what goes on between our ears long before our hands have done anything wrong. Then God’s books become terrifying, don’t they? God knows the thoughts and intentions of your heart. You can hide that from other people. You can trick other people into thinking you are as near perfect as possible. You can hide your sinful heart from everyone, but not from God.

Recognizing that, God’s judgment is terrifying! God’s books are terrifying! You and I ought to be swept away in God’s judgment just like the unbelieving world at the time of the flood.

But remember, the flood was both to destroy and *to save*! While the unbelieving world was destroyed in the flood, through that same act of judgment God brought salvation to his people, the few that were left. The same water that destroyed every living thing also saved Noah by lifting the ark above the water. In the process, God saved his promise of a Savior.

Now, in the Second Lesson, the Apostle Peter makes a comparison, **“In it [the ark] only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also”** (1 Peter 3:20,21). Baptism **“saves you”**. Peter’s words are an immense source of comfort for us, especially when considering Jesus’ return for judgment.

Baptism is more than a rite of initiation. It is more than a nice church ceremony. Baptism **“saves you”**. How is that possible? How can the simple water of Holy Baptism do anything? Baptism saves you because of the promise of God connected to Baptism. Baptism saves you because of the connection Baptism makes for you. Peter explains, **“baptism...now saves you also – not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand”** (1 Peter 3:21,22).

Baptism saves you because Baptism connects you to Jesus. When Jesus came the first time, he came to rescue you from sin. After thousands of years of waiting and preparation, the time was right for God to keep the greatest promise he ever made, the promise to send his own Son to rescue you by taking the curse of sin upon himself.

Jesus came, he was born of a lowly virgin. He lived a life of general obscurity in Nazareth. He amazed the crowds with his teaching and miracles. He was arrested, tried, convicted, and crucified. On the third day, in glorious splendor, he rose from the dead, having conquered and defeated sin and Satan. All of that was God’s plan to save you, to rescue you from the judgment your sin rightfully deserves. But, God needed a way to make the forgiveness Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection won your own. He needed a way to apply the benefits of Jesus to your account. That way is Holy Baptism.

Through Holy Baptism you have been connected to the forgiving grace of Jesus. Your sins have all been washed away. You were adopted into the family of God as his own child. Baptism then, is your lifeline. Baptism is the life-preserver God has thrown to you to save you from the flood of your sin. Baptism is the rescue God has given to you from the certainty of his judgment. Baptism is the gift God gives to you to prepare you for Jesus’ return.

Think again about those books John wrote about in Revelation, the books that list the deeds of all people, the books by which all people will be judged on the last day. You know what ought to be listed by your name – all your sin. Your hurtful thoughts, your ambivalence toward the things of God, your words that cause harm and pain to those around you, your acts of blatant disregard for God’s will. That should be your lasting record for all time.

But...you’ve been baptized. You have been washed clean of your sin. So now, next to your name in those books of deeds, God sees Jesus’ perfect life. He sees Jesus’ spotless record. Because, through Baptism, you have been given faith in Jesus as your Savior, your name is written in God’s other book. **“Another book was opened, which is the book of life”** (Revelation 20:12) John wrote. Your name has been written in the book of life, written with the blood of Jesus who died and rose again for you.

Throughout our lives, whenever our conscience would accuse us of guilt before God and make us afraid of God’s wrath, baptism gives the assurance that we cannot be condemned by God. Our sins have been washed away.

God gives you a gift in Holy Baptism. A gift to prepare you for Jesus’ return. When Jesus returns to judge, his coming will mean your final deliverance from sin. As the water of the flood saved Noah and his family from the corrupting influence of the sinful world, the water of Baptism has saved you from God’s coming judgment on the Last Day. Instead of judgment, you’ll hear Jesus’ wonderful invitation, **“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since**

the creation of the world” (Matthew 25:34). You are blessed by God because you stand spotless and pure in your baptismal grace.

So, again, Jesus says, **“If he comes suddenly, do not let him find you sleeping”** (Mark 13:36). Remain in your baptismal grace every day. Be strengthened in your faith by growing to know God’s love for you better through his Word. Use the tools your church gives to you in worship and Bible study so that you can firmly stand clothed in your baptism, on the day Jesus returns.

This Advent season, thank God for his gift of Baptism, the gift that gives you certainty of your forgiveness. Advent is a season of waiting, of preparation, of repentance, and of preparing for Jesus’ coming. Advent is also a season of joyful hope – that hope comes to us from the gifts God gives, gifts like Holy Baptism.

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy -- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power, and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord ... now and forevermore. (Jude 24-25)

Amen