

# **“Branches Cut Down from the Trees”**

**Matthew 21:1-11, Advent Sunday 1, Nov. 27, 2016**

Here we are once again at the beginning of a new Church year on this First Sunday in Advent; that little four-week season of the Church year in which the chosen Bible readings are all designed to focus our attention squarely on the four-fold coming of Jesus Christ our Savior into our world!

There is first of all his Promised-Coming in a great promise that God had made centuries ago to the Patriarch Abraham that one day through Abraham's seed – and through his descendants all the nations of the earth would one day be blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). As part of Christ's "Promised Coming" we also celebrate the manifold promises God had made through the words of the prophets of old!

What amazing promises these are—such as found in Isaiah 7:14, "Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Immanuel—which means God with us!" Or how about Isaiah 9? "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given—and his name shall be called, 'Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace and of increase of his government there shall be no end!'"

There is secondly our celebration of his actual coming into our world through his Holy Incarnation, "The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory—glory as of the only Son from the Father full of grace and truth" (John 1:14)!

There is thirdly his coming to us still today—impressing his real presence upon us through his HOLY WORD and BLESSED SACRAMENTS in the gift of the Holy Scriptures and the Gospel that is proclaimed and the Gospel that is made visible to our eyes – in Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

But there is also our Savior's fourth and final coming again for his Church in glory; that is yet to take place -- when the angels of heaven shall come with him. While the Apostle John was exiled on the Island of Patmos, God told John to right down words that God still intends for you and me to hear today: "Look, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and all peoples on earth will mourn because of him! So shall it be! Amen" (Revelation 1:7)!

Advent is a time for us to experience a **heightened expectation** and a **reawakened anticipation** of the coming of Jesus Christ, God's only Son, into our world! But this is not some type of heightened expectation or reawakened anticipation that we could ever **manufacture for ourselves**, but one that comes to us solely by the grace and mercy of God!

What a powerful promise it is that the Prophet Isaiah is making to the people of Israel in our Old Testament lesson today, at a time when the nation of Israel had lost so much of its former **clout and international influence** upon the world scene, as it had enjoyed some 300 years before this in the glorious reign of King David! And so why you might ask did we just read the Gospel lesson for Palm Sunday on this First Sunday of Advent?

Because it is especially in this event that we see the words of prophecy that God first spoke to the world through the words of Isaiah in our Old Testament today being fulfilled: "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and it shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the house of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem" (Isaiah 2:1-3)

Here Jesus is at long last now receiving openly and publicly the adoration and praise that were rightly due to him as the Promised Savior coming into our world. So often throughout our Lord's ministry, whenever he would heal a human being of some type of great physical affliction or infirmity—Jesus would say to those who witnessed it: "Now don't tell anyone about this!" He said this because he didn't want people getting the wrong idea about the kind of Promised Messiah that he came into our world to be!

Let's remember that Matthew, the author of the first Gospel account that appears in the New Testament, was actually one of Jesus' first twelve disciples; a Jewish person by birth. He was now targeting the writing of his Gospel account primarily to Jewish people—in his hopes of convincing them that Jesus was the Promised Savior of the world. --- This is why Matthew quotes the Old Testament scriptures more often in his Gospel account than any of the other Gospel writer do! Concerning our Lord's Palm Sunday ride, it is Matthew who quotes the Old Testament prophecy found in Zechariah 9 as now being fulfilled: "Say to the daughter of Zion, 'Behold your king is coming to you, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt the foal of a beast of burden!'"

Now the eyes of all the world are being directed to Mount Zion; to that glorious elevation in the city of Jerusalem where Solomon's temple had been built and that temple that Herod had now been in the process of rebuilding for 46 years (John 2:2).

The day will come Isaiah prophesies that the whole world is interested in hearing God's divine instruction that would come and still comes to people on all four corners of our globe—through the word of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ into our world.

The prophet Isaiah was not necessarily speaking in a literal fashion here, that Mount Zion would one day be taller than Mount Everest or Mount Kilimanjaro! NO, the prophet is speaking in terms of Israel's influence on the world scene again because this is where the Promised Messiah had at long last come—to receive that joyful acclamation and praise: "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!"

Brothers and sisters, I have fortunately been, by the grace of God, a professional student of the Bible for some 43 years now, looking back to when I first enrolled in Concordia Lutheran College in Austin, Texas back in 1973—taking courses in the Old Testament first, and then the New. And I never ceased to be amazed --- that God the Holy Spirit is always ready and willing to teach me new things about the Bible I have never learned before; new insight into God's Word, even as I recently discovered another new insight about this Palm Sunday Gospel lesson that I never knew before!

One of the greatest themes of St. Matthew's Gospel account—is that Jesus Christ has come into this world as the **TRUE SON OF DAVID!** And just as **DAVID WAS ISRAEL'S KING, JESUS IS NOW OUR KING!** In 2 Samuel 15, we read of David's leading another procession years before this, but in the opposite direction, fleeing Mount Zion to the Mount of Olives because of his own son Absalom's rebellion against him, who tried desperately to unseat his father David from the throne and to place himself there instead!

In contrast to the **LAMENTS** of KING DAVID---NOW JESUS, THE SON OF DAVID COMES INTO THE CITY FROM THE MOUNT OF OLIVES TO MOUNT ZION, SURROUNDED BY SHOUTS OF HOPE, JOY AND JUBILATION!

In the words of our Collect today we read: "Stir up your power, O Lord and come!" and we certainly can see Jesus stirring up a lot of power in his Palm Sunday ride! Here Jesus rides on the royal donkey foretold by the Prophet Zechariah, the same exact kind of animal that Solomon rode into Jerusalem when he was first anointed also as Israel's King as David's successor.

David had several sons, but his son Absalom, the Bible tells us, was the most handsome; more handsome than all the other young men in Israel at that time. In this respect, he was David's son who stood head and shoulders above the rest! From the soles of his feet to the crown of his head there was not even so much as a blemish upon him. The long red hair on his head was

full and thick, but the **THOUGHTS INSIDE HIS HEAD WERE WICKED AND DEVIIOUS**. Like Cain at Creation's Dawn who murdered his brother Abel, Absalom also murdered his brother and fled—causing his broken-hearted father—King David—to weep over all the immense pain that was coursing throughout his whole family.

Nevertheless – King David still loved his rebellious son; his son who even plotted to have David killed. In time, he called for his son to return again to the Royal City. His son Absalom did come home—but rather than his coming home with a repentant heart and mind, his thoughts were only more evil than ever before.

Now Absalom would camp for four years just outside of the gates of the Holy City Jerusalem, functioning in the role of a politician. There Absalom heard the complaints of the people and promised them all solutions. In time, he won the hearts of the people, and at the end of the four years, he revealed his secret plan. In 2 Samuel 15:10, we read of him directing others: “As soon as you hear the sound of the trumpet, then say: “Absalom is King at Hebron’!”

When this hurtful message came to Absalom's father King David, that the hearts of the people had gone after Absalom (v. 13), David then said to his servants and those in his Army close to him: “Arise let us flee, or else there will be no escape for us from Absalom” (2 Samuel 15:14)!

But on that first Palm Sunday, in sharp contrast to the **LAMENTS of KING DAVID EXITING JERUSALEM, JESUS THE SON OF DAVID COMES INTO THE CITY—SURROUNDED BY GREAT SHOUTS OF HOPE, JOY, AND JUBILATION!** In

contrast to this: “David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, weeping as he went, barefoot and with his head covered” (15:30)!

Brothers and sisters, aren't there times when we, just like King David, experience in our lives and in relationships with others the brokenness of sin?

Yes, we see it in the world around us, as Dylan Roof now at long last is going to trial for gunning down 9 innocent people at the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston in June of 2015; who had just welcomed him into their midst to participate with them in a Bible study-

We can also see it in our families—which is one reasons why the “holidays” as the world speaks of them can be so difficult for people—making them all even more acutely aware of the hurts they are suffering in their own homes. And we can see it in our own lives too!

Amid the dreams of the “perfect Christmas” is the awareness of our own sin and imperfections. Like David, we have wept and tasted the bitterness of our tears. Like David, we can flee in terror from our sin and its consequences.

Sin can certainly prompt every one of us to retreat from the world and do its best to persuade every one of us to isolate ourselves from one another and that our just punishment for our sin is to be **DRIVEN OUT FROM THE PRESENCE OF GOD ALTOGETHER**. For all us who have ever experienced the brokenness of sin and who have been driven from comfort by our failures, or the failures of others and have cried out to God for deliverance—there is **GOOD NEWS FOR YOU AND ME FROM GOD THIS MORNING: “YOUR KING COMES TO YOU, RIGHTEOUS AND HAVING SALVATION!”**

Fortunately Absalom was not David's only son, because by God's great design, Jesus is the Son of David who has come into our world to be our King—**NOT JUST ISRAEL'S KING BUT THE KING FOR ALL PEOPLE WHO LONG FOR RECONCILIATION WITH OUR HEAVENLY FATHER AND A HOPED FOR RECONCILIATION WITH ONE ANOTHER!**

In contrast to Absalom, and a few other of David's rebellious sons, Jesus comes to Jerusalem, humble and gentle, riding on a donkey. Though he was more popular with the crowds than Absalom could have ever become, Jesus did not come to Jerusalem on that first Sunday of Holy Week to curry their favor, but instead to be rejected by them. As we enter the Season of Advent again today, let's remember that King David, Jesus will ... a few days later ... be driven out of the city—NOT FOR HIS SIN—but for the sin of all humanity. He will die, rejected even by his Heavenly Father. He will even share in the curse of Absalom, when we read in 2 Samuel 18 of Absalom and in Galatians 3 of our blessed Savior: "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree" (Gal 3:13; cf. 2 Sam 18:9, 14–18).

The humble King who rode into Jerusalem in humility comes to us. In repentance, our Savior still comes to us, by his resurrection power, to meet us with the gift of Holy Faith today! In the humble forms of God's written Word of the Holy Scriptures and through the gifts of water, bread, and wine, our King still comes to us, personally and individually, to forgive us our many sins and renew our place of "son-ship" in the family of God.

And we need to do it today because you heard the words of St. Paul in our epistle lesson today: "You know the time: that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:11-12)!

So "behold, your king," the Son of David, "coming to you."

When I took another close look at the Gospel lesson this morning, there was a phrase that just jumped out of me that I was seeking to choose the title for this message today: "They cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road!" These branches were Palm branches, which were often used as symbols in the Roman Empire, but also as symbols among the people of Israel; powerful symbols for a military victory bestowing honor on those successful warriors who conquered in the strife. Like those branches, we who deign to be the disciples of Jesus Christ, are also to become symbols of God's victory over sin, death and the power of Satan in our world too.

You know this past week, I remembered how that when Fort Moultrie in Charleston was first attacked by the British, that the soft Palmetto trees with which the fort was built prior to the Revolutionary War actually became like a catcher's mitt—that rather than allowing the walls of that military complex to crack and fall to the ground in destruction, as actually able to successfully catch those cannon balls being hurled in their direction, without dismantling the fort. The Palmetto tree is a palm tree, and the word "palmetto," I read this past week is actually the Spanish word for a "little" palm tree, reminding us that the Palmetto palms are usually much shorter than other varieties of Palm trees that grow much, much taller than the Palmetto tree into the air.

If you think I should not be comparing you and me to palm branches cut down from a tree, this morning, then let me remind of Jesus who on the night before he died – compared us to branches; but branches on a grape vine, saying: "I am the true Vine and my Father is the Vine dresser, every branch that abides in me bears much fruit; and this is to my Father's glory—that you bear much fruit and so prove yourselves to be my disciples!"

Just like those palm branches waved on that first Sunday, and on every other Sunday since then by millions or other believers throughout the centuries—we are to be symbols of God's victory and triumph over sin, death and the grave too! Amen