

☩ I preach in God's name for God's people. Let my words be from God and for God's people. **Amen**

Good morning.

I. TWO WEEKS AGO WE HEARD

that signs will precede Christ's return in glory.

The *usual* signs of the sun, moon, and stars themselves remind us to keep alert, to be prepared. The natural orbit of the moon reminds us to anticipate that a day is coming when the moon will be *too* close — the dawn of Christ in glory.

So, too, the eclipses are given; so, too, the tumult of the nations; so, too, the crescendoing waves. These regular signs are given for us to be *regularly reminded* of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in glory, who does not want any one of us to be unaware about his return, or to be caught faithless.

We do not want to be found having wasted the hot coals of our faith on matters that keep us from faith, whose hot coals have now become cool to the touch.

II. LAST WEEK WE HEARD

John the Baptist ask Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come?"

John, in prison, wants to know — more than anything else — whether he has been a faithful steward.

If he has correctly identified Jesus as the Christ, as the one who was to come, then he can remain in prison and die, knowing his mission has been fulfilled. But if he has incorrectly identified the Christ as Jesus, then his ministry has been a failure. He will need to get back to work, back to discipling, back to baptizing and calling for repentance, and he will have to find and identify the real Christ for God's people.

How does Jesus respond to John's question? He doesn't give John a simple "yes" or "no;" instead, he tells the people that John is the Messenger who was to come. By identifying John as the Messenger, Jesus identifies himself — the one whom John pointed to — as the Christ. John's ministry has been a success.

All pastors, priests bishops, deacons must likewise evaluate our ministry—is my ministry a success or failure? But when we look at our worldly metrics, we are almost sure to misunderstand, mis-evaluate our ministry.

Paul gave us the blueprint for our metric of success: to steward the mystery of faith — the good news — faithfully. That means that I must keep the faith, that I must proclaim the good news in season and out of season, and that I must encourage those entrusted to this congregation to remain in the faith. But the whole body of Christ is needed. Faith cannot be done by only pastors. The Lord needs more than pastors — he needs the whole people of God to join together as his body to carry out his mission in this world.

And as this season of Advent comes to an end, we can put the mission this way: to prepare *this congregation* and those whom we encounter to be ready for the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. THIS MORNING WE HEARD

Mary immediately visited her relative Elizabeth.

Elizabeth, like Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel from of old, was barren, but is barren no longer. She is now in her sixth month, and is visited by her relative, Mary. Note the honor which Elizabeth bestows upon her relative:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!
43 And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

God's promise, the infant Jesus in her womb, has transformed who Mary is. No longer is Mary just her relative; to Elizabeth and to all of us, she is now: "the mother of my Lord." No longer can Mary be known apart from the mission given to her by God, the mission of mothering Jesus, the Son of God.

And though it was a great surprise and a great gift that Mary was chosen to be the mother of Jesus, the coming of Jesus was not a surprise. (Hence the appropriately titled hymn, *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus.*)

Mary's response — famously known as the Magnificat — reminds us of this fact: "As he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

God cannot *not fulfill* his promises.

God made a promise to Abraham, a promise of a son and of becoming a great nation. And he also promised that in Abraham, "all the families of the earth will be blessed." That *all families will be blessed* is the redemption of the world we look forward to in Jesus. The whole of God's promise is coming to be fulfilled in Jesus, beginning in the womb of Mary.

But perhaps we think that the promise of the Christ was given only to Abraham. If so, we would be mistaken. The coming of the Christ is exhaustively promised throughout the Old Testament. We heard one of these in Deuteronomy:

18 I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers.

And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

19 And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him.

Many prophets came after Moses, but no prophet could fully meet this threshold — none until the coming of the infant Jesus. Who, other than Jesus, could meet and exceed the signs and wonders of Moses? Who, other than Jesus, spoke *all* that God commanded him?

The season of Advent reminds us that God *has fulfilled* his promise of the Christ, of the Savior, in Jesus. Always, all of history was unfolding to bring about the fullness of time, to bring about the birth of the Christ, to bring about the Son of God, from the womb of Mary.

There has always only been this one trajectory for all of human history — the coming of the Christ.

Christ has come. **Christ is risen. Christ will come again.**

The season of Advent reminds us that Jesus has come, and that Jesus will return. For all of history is now unfolding — perhaps unraveling even — to bring about the return of the Christ.

Because Jesus has promised to return, he will return. He has promised that no one will know the hour. And he has warned that we keep watch and be ready. For all of history, all of mankind, will be judged by one rubric alone — by the man Jesus the Christ. The only one who is worthy to be our judge; the only one who is just; the only one who is good.

Our culture does not seem to believe in the return of Christ or in the judgment that is to come.

Those who proclaim that the climate will destroy us and those who proclaim that AI super intelligence will destroy us are on the right track — the end will come. But they miss the main message: therefore, turn to Christ.

No longer does our culture view things in light of the coming day of judgment, when all things done in the darkness will be brought to light, and when all things done in Christ will endure eternally.

We can be sure that however many releases of the Epstein files are made, or however many redactions are made to protect this or that person, those who are guilty will be exposed and judged. The judgment that is to come is good.

The Church Year — and especially the end of the season of Pentecost and this season of Advent — is a necessary salve to a culture that rejects Christ's coming in glory and in judgment. Our culture demands our time, our busyness, our money, our cares, our anxiety, our attention. The cares of work, of culture, of chores eat up our time and our attention, time and attention that we cannot recover.

As Christians, we can fall into the danger that Christ's coming is long way off, and so we just have no need of being ready for him. "I can wait on *that* stuff. I have more pressing things to focus on *now*."

The coach of Oklahoma fell into this exact trap on Friday. During the halftime interview, he made the mistake of believing and saying, “We’ll be okay.” I was astounded by his false confidence, his flippant attitude. His team had dominated 17-0 early on, only to give up the lead and the momentum to being tied 17-17 at the half. What business, what right, did he have to say, “We’ll be okay.” That’s the wrong message to his team. And his team was punished for it; they lost.

Likewise, none of us can rely on saying, “we’ll be okay,” or “well, it’s not that big of a deal” in regard to our faith. Our faith in Jesus is *the* deal. It’s what gives eternal staying power to anything we may accomplish; and lack of faith is what ensures that what we accomplish will not matter in the scope of eternity.

The question is therefore not *What enduring legacy will we make for ourselves on this earth?* but rather — What eternal legacy will Christ accomplish in us? For whatever we do in Christ will be impossible to not echo and reverberate through eternity.

God’s promises being fulfilled in his people. That’s the story of Abraham, the story of David, the story of Moses, the story of Elizabeth, the story of Mary — and we have the great privilege and opportunity for that to be our story and our legacy, too.

All of us gathered here are on the same trajectory that all of human history has always been on — towards Christ’s coming. At his return — and until his return — we want to be found doing his business, we want to be about his mission.

We began this mission — like Sylvia, Dorothy, Harriet, and Crosby — in baptism, when God adopted us into his family, when our parents made — or we made — this promise:

“You should, therefore, bring Sylvia, Dorothy, Harriet, and Crosby, to the services of God’s house, them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten commandments. As they grow in years, you should place in their hands the Holy Scriptures and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith, that, living in the covenant of their Baptism and in communion with the Church, they may lead a godly life until the day of Jesus Christ.”

None of these children — and none of the rest of gathered here — will have a rich, deep, lively faith if we were to take this baptismal promise as lightly as Oklahoma’s coach, saying, “We’ll be okay.” It is spiritually dangerous to make this promise and not to make good on it.

What God offers us in baptism is an eternal family, an eternal legacy, a fruitfulness which is unable to be bounded by death or this life. We are promised life with Jesus forever — life with the only one who is good and who is the source of what is good. With him is where we want to be.

In baptism, our stories become the next chapter in the stories of the lives of Abraham, David, Moses, Elizabeth, and Mary — a book that continues to be written until the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

As this season of Advent comes to a close, we reconsider our lives in light of the sure and certain return of Christ. For he gives us signs and seasons as warnings. And these warnings are so that we remember that we are dust destined for eternity.

☩ All Glory be to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, now and forever, **Amen.**