

*For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit,<sup>19</sup> through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison<sup>20</sup> who disobeyed long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water,<sup>21</sup> and this water symbolizes baptism that 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,<sup>22</sup> who has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him. (1 Peter 3:18-22)*

### **Advent Means Christ has Arrived**

I think every year I tell you that Advent means “coming” or “arrival.” I guess I’m doomed to repeating myself in my old age. Today is the start of a new church year and the year always begins with Advent. Every year, I tell you that we focus on Jesus’ first coming in Bethlehem, his second coming at the end of the world and his coming into our hearts by faith. That’s all true. But at the same time, there’s a reason that we start the church year with Advent. If you think about what comes next – Christmas and then Epiphany, with the story of Jesus’ baptism and all his miracles and ministry, and then Lent and then Easter – we’re following the life of Christ. Advent takes us back to the days before he came, the days of waiting and wondering, the days of anticipation. That’s why, during our Wednesday night services this year, we’re going to use Old Testament prophecies to reflect on what it meant to wait for Jesus. But this morning, we want recognize that we can’t completely put ourselves into the place of those Old Testament believers who waited and watched and wondered when their Savior would come. For us, that first coming is a reality. Everyone here knows that. But still we celebrate Advent. We celebrate the keeping of God’s promise. For us, **Advent means that Christ has arrived.**

#### **I.**

But why did he come? We all know the answer to that question, and yet, year after year, I stop and wonder at what Jesus did. St. Peter says, **“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”** That’s the thing that I hope I never lose my sense of wonder about. **Advent means that Christ has arrived. He arrived to die, once for all.**

Right up front, Peter says what God was doing during all those centuries when he promised that Jesus would come. He tells us what the Jewish people were waiting for and what we are celebrating this morning: Christ died for sins, once for all. It’s done. It never needs to be done again. There is no sin that you have ever committed, there is no sin that you can commit, that Jesus did not die for. Isn’t that an amazing comfort? Think of the worst sin you’ve ever done. Think of the things that you hate to remember, the sins that embarrass you and cause you to question your standing as a Christian. Jesus died for all the sins that torment you most. He died for that thing that makes you feel like a hypocrite when you come into God’s house. He died for that thing that you wish that you could erase from your memory, that thing that you wish you could go back in time and undo, that thing that you know deserves hell itself – and that the devil loves to throw in your face. Jesus died and paid for it once and for all. Now it is erased from God’s record.

Why is it erased? Because the righteous one took the place of all unrighteous people. He took the place of you and me. Two thousand years ago, when Jesus hung on the cross outside of Jerusalem, he was hanging there for that sin that still torments you today, a sin that wouldn’t happen for twenty centuries yet when he was dying. Jesus died and he paid for the sins that you and I will fall into today, for the sins that get us over and over again, for the sins that we haven’t even thought of yet. He thought of them all. He died and he paid for every one of them. He could do that because he was righteous. Never in his life did he commit one of those sins. That’s what made his human life different than ours. He never had those moments when he remembered things he wished he could forget. He never had those moments of weakness when he sinned, even though he knew better. He never once felt guilty before God. He was righteous in our place. Then he died in our place.

And because he was the Son of God as well as a real human being, that life and death paid for all of us. As Peter put it, he did all that to bring us to God. All that sin that we rightly regret put up a wall between us and

God and we simply could not get over it or through it or around it. We were locked out of heaven forever. But Jesus came to change all that.

Peter says, **“He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit, through whom also he went and preached to the spirits in prison.”** Once that body died, Jesus was in the same situation that we will all be in one day. A human body cannot come to life on its own. Death is final. But Jesus was made alive. When he rose, he told the whole world that everything is now different. We can now come to God. The wall has a gaping hole blown in it, because Jesus shattered the law of death and rose. We know that we will rise and conquer death. To show how complete that victory is, Jesus went and preached to the spirits in prison.

Do you know what Peter was talking about here? You confess it every time we say the Apostles’ Creed: “He descended into hell.” The spirits in prison are the souls in hell. Peter refers to those who died long ago when Noah lived. The great flood took place thousands of years before Jesus was born. As we heard in our first lesson this morning, Noah lived in a time of great sin and rebellion against God. That whole generation was wiped out and sent to hell. And when Jesus rose, he went to preach to them in prison. But be a little careful here. When we think of preaching, we usually think of what I’m doing right now. We think of a message whose purpose is either to strengthen the faith of believers or to convert unbelievers. That’s not what Jesus went there to do. It was too late for those unbelievers to believe and be saved. They had their chance. Peter says that God waited patiently. For a hundred years, Noah built the ark and testified to them about their sin and God’s grace. That ark was so big that no one could miss it. It was sign calling them to hear. But they refused to listen. So when they died they went to hell.

And when Jesus descended into hell, he didn’t go there to let them out. He went to proclaim his victory. Jesus arrived in hell to show that his arrival on earth was one hundred percent successful. He died and he rose and now, even the devil himself cannot stop him from coming into hell. So the devil cannot take us. Sin cannot defeat us. Our own guilt will not drag us down to hell, because Christ has the power to reach all the way there and pull us out. That’s what Advent means. It’s the beginning of Christ’s work for us. Don’t doubt that Christ completed that work. Don’t doubt that you are forgiven and paid for and saved.

## II.

Jesus did all that for the whole world. He even did it for those unbelievers who were condemned to hell before he died. He paid for every sin. But does that mean then, that what we do and think doesn’t matter? Not at all. Jesus paid for us, but for us to have the benefit, we still need to trust it. Some of you have heard me use this illustration before, but I think it makes the point clear for us: if I were to open a checking account for you, if I went to my bank and put your name on the account, if I deposited ten thousand dollars into that account and then I brought you those starter checks – the ones that don’t have your name on them yet, just the number, you could do a lot with that money, right? You could make car payments and house payments. You could have a really nice Christmas this year. But what if you didn’t believe me? What if you thought that this was a practical joke and that I was going to laugh when the checks bounced? What if you tore them up and threw them away? Would the money still be there? Yes. But would you have any benefit from it? No. Jesus died and rose and descended into hell for all people everywhere. He has deposited into the account in heaven of every human being his own perfect the life and his sufferings and death. We are all paid for. But if we refuse to trust that message – if we refuse to write checks – if we insist on being judged based on being good people, the work of Christ is wasted on us. We will go to hell. So Jesus didn’t only come to win eternal life for us. He came to give it to each one of us personally. We live now in that age of his giving. **Advent means that Christ has arrived. He arrived to save us personally.**

Peter goes off on a tangent to make that point. The souls in hell from the time of Noah gave him the chance to talk about us. He says that eight people were saved in the ark that Noah spent a hundred years building while God waited for repentance. The way he put it is interesting: eight people **“were saved through water.”** The Greek actually has the idea of them passing through the water. Then he says, **“This water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also.”** I love this text, because he says it so clearly and simply. Baptism now saves you. When I had the privilege of baptizing my own children, these words were running through my head. Every time I baptize someone, I think of these words, because at that moment, we are not following some empty church ritual. We are not jumping through some kind of ecclesiastical hoop. We are not doing something to earn God’s favor or forgiveness. Peter didn’t say, “The pastor baptizing you now saves you” or “By being baptized you saved yourself.” He says, “Baptism now save you.”

God acts in baptism. He combines his word with the water and he reaches into the heart of the person being baptized – even when it’s the heart of a baby – and he washes that heart. As Peter continued, it’s not the removal of dirt from our body. It’s not the kind of bath or shower you took this morning. It’s the pledge of a good conscience before God. In other words, when you and I were baptized, God washed our sins away and pledged to us that we can forget our guilt. We can have a good conscience before him. And he didn’t just do that for the sins we committed before we were baptized. He made a promise that when he looks at us, he sees Jesus, and so he calls us holy and righteous and perfect, like Jesus was holy and perfect. So think again of that most horrible sin that torments you. God washed even that sin away when you were baptized. God wants you to have peace with that sin. God wants you to swim spiritually in the waters of your baptism and know that all the spiritual filth and dirt on you are gone forever.

Was there ever a moment in your life when God came to you more personally than at the moment of your baptism? The only things that compare are communion and private confession. When you kneel here and receive the body and blood of Christ, when you come to your pastor and confess the sins that torment you, God is speaking to you – exclusively to you, the person confessing or communing. His word of forgiveness is yours and yours alone. In exactly the same way, when we are washed in the water and the word of baptism, there can be no doubt whose sins are washed away. You were washed. Your sins are gone.

And why are they gone? Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He rose to declare to the whole world that we have his righteousness in our account. He came to us in baptism to make sure that we understand that that account belongs to us personally. It’s yours. It’s mine. And we are free. Just to make sure that there is no doubt about it at all, Peter concludes by saying that Jesus **“has gone into heaven and is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him.”** Even the angels in heaven bow to Christ, the Son of God and the Savior. That’s who died and rose for you. That’s who has come and declared that you personally are forgiven and free. The Lord of heaven and earth has declared it. Can there be any doubt that it’s true?

That is what Advent begins to celebrate. For the next few weeks, we’re going to talk about Jesus coming. We’re going to look back at Old Testament believers waiting. We’re going to see that God kept the promise to them and to us and then he promised that Jesus will come again. That all began to be fulfilled when Jesus came in Bethlehem. He has arrived. He has done it all. Be at peace. Amen.