

“The Advent of Our King: The Incarnate King”

“The advent of our king Our prayers must now employ, And we must hymns of welcome sing In strains of holy joy.” We joined to sing those words just a few minutes ago. They are the words of the first stanza of the very first hymn in our hymnal. Why do you suppose that hymn has that position? I mean that hymnal, published in 1993, contains 623 hymns. Why place this particular hymn in the very first spot? It is not a hymn written by Martin Luther, or even by a Lutheran. The man who wrote the hymn was a French man by the name of Charles Coffin. It’s one of two hymns that he wrote originally in Latin which in English translations have made it into the hymnal that we use. And I don’t believe that this hymn made it to number 1 by a vote of popularity among WELS hymnal users.

One of the reasons that this hymn has that position is that it is an Advent hymn. The order of hymns in the hymnal is heavily influenced by the progression of the Church Year. The first season of the Church Year, Advent, has the first hymns in the hymnal, the first 32 of them, to be exact. I don’t really have any incredible insight beyond that into the position of this hymn, but I suspect that those who worked on the hymnal put it there because it captures very well the spirit of the Advent season. It is an obvious Advent hymn that relates many Advent themes, and thus it became a natural fit for the first hymn. It looks back at the advent, or coming, of Jesus Christ as a baby. It alludes to our receiving Jesus Christ in Word and sacraments. It looks ahead to Christ’s coming again as judge of the world. This Advent season we will be using the title of this hymn to focus our attention as we prepare our hearts to once again celebrate Christmas.

As the title of this hymn is The Advent of Our King, we’ll spend some time speaking about kings in general and this King in particular. Outside of church, I don’t spend much time thinking about or speaking about kings. I have never lived under the authority of an earthly king. I have only imagined what it may have been like to live under one in past times in other lands. But what I know of earthly kings, whether now or in world history, tells me that this King is clearly very special.

Today we take note that our Advent King is special in terms of his birth and his ancestry. This is not something that in and of itself is unique to King Jesus. The lineage of earthly kings has often been very important. In the Old Testament we find examples of this. All of the kings of Judah were descendants of King David. They carried on the family line and along with it the position of authority. When we look at the history of the New Testament, we can find other examples. King Herod, one of the most famous kings of the New Testament, killed members of his own family in order to reduce the number of potential threats to his power. In secular history, too, we often find that the role of king is passed from father to son.

But the ancestry and birth of our Advent King is very special indeed. He calls no earthly king his father, but God himself. His mother was not a member of the royalty, but a lowly virgin. He is an incarnate King. Of course, incarnate is another word that we don’t use much outside of church. Incarnate means that something becomes flesh or takes on flesh. It comes from Latin words to that effect. “In” is pretty obvious to us. The second part we may not recognize as easily in English, but we use a similar word when we have *carne asada* or *chili con carne*. When we say that our King is incarnate, we are saying that he is true God in human flesh. He is true God and also a true human being.

Our two Scripture readings spoke about that. In the one, we heard how in Jesus “all the fullness of the Deity,” everything that God is, “lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). In the other, we heard the angel announce to Joseph that Mary’s baby was special in this way. He was conceived in her by the Holy Spirit and would fulfill God’s promise of a virgin-born Savior.

Our sermon text focuses on that truth from the perspective of a promise. Thousands of years before Jesus was born, God promised this special Savior, our Advent King. The words of this promise are printed for you in the worship folder, and you may have already read them. I will still read them aloud, but want to put them into a bit of context.

The book of Genesis, from which they come, records how God created the world. It tells us how he created the first human beings, Adam and Eve, and placed them in a beautiful garden. He gave them everything that they could possibly need or want. He gave them productive work to do. And he provided them with a means to worship him, by avoiding the eating of the fruit of one particular tree that stood in the middle of the garden. That's really a summary of the first two chapters of Genesis. In chapter 3, things take a terrible turn.

First comes the temptation. Satan, taking on a serpent's form, comes to Eve to lure her into eating the forbidden fruit. He slyly convinces her that God is withholding something good from her. He suggests that she would be better off turning against God, and that by serving herself she would really become like God. And for some almost inexplicable reason, understandable to us only because we have acted the same way so many times, Eve listens. She takes the bait, and she takes the fruit. She eats the fruit and shares it with Adam.

And just like that the entire human race had fallen into sin. They had turned their back on God. They had served their own selfish goals. They quickly demonstrate that the perfection of the garden was gone. Adam and Eve are embarrassed and scared. They are no longer living in harmony with each other, with the created world, or with God. They hide from God, as if that were possible. And when God confronted them, they blamed each other. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the serpent. And then come the words of our text: **So the Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, "Cursed are you above all the livestock and all the wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life. And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."**

With these words begins a series of curses that God speaks over the now sin-filled world. Nothing would be the same. Relationships would continue in their spoiled condition. Food would be difficult to grow. Children would be born only through great pain.

But right in the midst of pronouncing these curses, God also offers his promise. The words are spoken to the serpent, but they were for Adam and Eve, and for you and me. The offspring—literally the seed—of the woman would bear a blow against his heel but would land a fatal blow to the satanic serpent.

No, these words don't speak directly of a king. They don't use that terminology. They don't say, "incarnate," but that is exactly what they mean. Here in the garden, human beings had proven that they could not undo the consequences of sin. They could not avoid the shame or the guilt. God would have to do it. And he would through the seed of the woman. No human father is mentioned because none will be needed. Already God has his plan to send his own Son. Already he is promising to take on human flesh and blood and to suffer in order to save.

In these weeks of Advent, we are preparing to meet our incarnate King. There is much more to him than what can be seen or noticed. He is not a mere human being. In him, even as a little baby at Bethlehem, all the fullness of the Deity dwells. And he comes to soothe our pain. He comes to remove our guilt. He comes to set right what we have ruined and to restore the relationships that we have destroyed. Our hymn says it this way: "The everlasting Son Incarnate deigns to be, Himself a servant's form puts on To set his servants free" (stanza 2).

This is no ordinary king. He deserves our praises and our prayers. He deserves our hymns and songs. He deserves our repentance and our service. In all these ways let's celebrate his coming.