

First Sunday in Advent – 2025

Isaiah 2:1-5

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 21:1-11

How many of y'all use cruise control? It's a pretty handy device, cruise control. Dial in the speed that you want to travel and let your mind wander into la-la land. Is that an overstatement? I don't use cruise control. Perhaps it's because I am a control-freak. Perhaps it's because I'm hyper-vigilant when I'm behind the wheel. For me, it's a small thing to move my right foot up and down to control the speed of the car, plus because there's so much starting and stopping on our freeways, I don't like the hassle of on, off, on, off, on, off. Admittedly, I'm old school. Alise and I rented a Tacoma pickup while on a trip this summer. It braked for me if it thought that I was too close to the car in front of me. Now, I'm not a tailgater; truly. We couldn't figure out how to turn off this feature. Was I in control of the car or was the car in control of me? Did the car not trust me? What had I ever done to the Tacoma pickup truck, anyway?

What does *spiritual* cruise control look like? Sorta relaxed, maybe? Cruise control is relinquishing something important, yes? We've entered the season of Advent. Advent is intended to be spiritual No-Doz. For those of you who are unfamiliar with No-Doz, they are a brand of caffeine-based pills that are designed to combat drowsiness and fatigue and increase alertness. One of the principal figures in Advent is John the Baptist. John the Baptist is a spiritual alarm clock, a morning rooster for the soul, a bottle of spiritual No-Doz. John's voice is a natural stimulant to the dozing Christian, a dose of adrenaline to the blood stream of the believer. What does He demand? He demands that we prepare. Prepare for the Lord's arrival. Make straight His paths. The kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3)! And that is true. Spiritual cruise control is to be anathema among us, a rejected method of navigating this life.

Here's how to tell that someone is on spiritual cruise control: they don't seem to be interested in or devoted to God's means of grace. That's a big one. They're busy. They have something else to focus on. They are prioritizing other things in their lives. Advent takes our spiritual journey out of the abstract and makes it urgent, makes it a matter of immediate necessity. The church year is your ally. The readings for each Sunday in the church year have been chosen to make an extraordinary point, a valid and pressing point. This First Sunday in Advent focuses on our Lord's Triumphal Entry in Jerusalem. Why? Because you are to be ready when He returns. Because you are to be just like those pilgrims to Jerusalem who welcomed Jesus into the city of His destiny two thousand years ago. Because the only way to be prepared to receive Him properly when He comes on the Last Day is to be with Him now, receive Him now, welcome Him now. And He comes to us, He enters this Divine Service triumphantly, as the risen King. Blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.

I'm not sure what y'all have in your mind when it comes to our Lord's return. Some think of cataclysmic events. Some think of all of us being caught up in the clouds. Some think of being judged. All of that is biblical; all of that is true. And we are to prepare for it because it is inevitable, it will come to pass. Two things here: Firstly, we prepare by anticipating His return, by clearing the sin from our lives, by repentance, by taking spiritual matters out of the abstract

and making His return the foremost reality in your life. We prepare in order to bless ourselves. But that is not all. Secondly, we prepare in order to bless Him.

Everyone here knows the “The Little Drummer Boy.” It’s a beautiful song with a beautiful sentiment. The young lad is poor. He doesn’t have the means to purchase a fancy gift for the infant King. What he does have is a drum and the little boy plays. Humbly, faithfully, sincerely, the boy plays. That is the gift which he offers. The sentiment is spot on. The gift is to be remodeled in your mind. What do you have to give? When our Lord returns, what will you give *Him*? Are you even thinking about it? Here’s what St. Paul writes: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:1-2).

Have you ever thought of *yourself* as a gift to our crucified King? I’m not very good at wrapping gifts, but I try. If you are going to give yourself to the Lord of the cross, would you wrap yourself in profanity or in repentance and devotion and humility and goodness and sacrifice? The Baptizer tells us to produce good works in keeping with repentance because the kingdom of heaven is near (Matthew 3:8). Does John ignore grace? When John says that the ax is already laid to the root of the tree, he is expressing alarm, urgency for every human being to devote themselves to producing the fruit which the Lord, who approaches, is looking for (Matthew 3:9). Did He skip the day that they taught about grace at the seminary? Do you think that because you are saved by grace that you needn’t be urgent about preparing for our Lord’s return (bearing fruit)? *That’s* spiritual cruise control. That a very Lutheran type of spiritual cruise control – using the beauty of grace as a predicate for spiritual laziness. Advent calls you to a higher life, a more spiritually aware life.

In just a moment our children are going to sing a very powerful hymn. It’s a children’s hymn, a sweet and picturesque hymn – “I Am Jesus’ Little Lamb” (LSB #740). The imagery comes from John 10, Psalm 23, and Isaiah 40 among other places. It’s a hymn of reliance, trust, and great faith. The final stanza of the hymn speaks of death. Our children will sing of their death, and yours. “And when my short life is ended, By His angel host attended, He shall fold me to His breast, there within His arms to rest.” Out of the mouths of babes comes one of the most beautiful lines in our hymn book. That’s what we are preparing for. “Our salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed” (Romans 13:11). That is most certainly true. Layers and layers of truth are in that statement. Our Lord’s return is closer. Our death is closer. Our entry to Paradise is closer. Do you prepare for something more the closer it gets or do you become blasé, disinterested, and preoccupied as the big event gets near? Spiritual cruise control – it’s far more prevalent than you imagine.

St. Paul told the congregation in Corinth that “today is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). Is it true? Does the crucified and risen Christ enter this holy house today to afford us all the bounty of His sacrifice? Does Christ the King minister to us poor sinners by giving us the astounding gift of His body and blood today? Is *today* the day of salvation? Does the Word of God accomplish all that He intends as it proceeds from His mouth to your ears, your heart today (Isaiah 55)? Have you been invigorated by the grace of God? Have you been enlivened by His

love? Has He humbled Himself, taking on the form of a servant, and given you the seat of honor, the prestige of His banquet table today? All your sins were put on Him. He came to endure the punishment that each of us deserves. He became the sole object of God's wrath against sin. He died as the greatest sinner, the only sinner. The good and glorious and holy Son of God died as the maximus peccator – the greatest sinner. And you are forgiven *today*. God's grace surrounds you *today*. Life, His life, defines you *today*. He is coming soon. We are to prepare. We welcome Him now, we receive His gifts now and we prepare for His return now. Advent is leading us in a most glorious way. Can you see it or are you on cruise control?