

“The Messiah Arrives”

Reading: Luke 2:1-20; Revelation 19:1-16

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

Now we are approaching the end of our observance of the season of Advent. Christmas is only a few days away, and we will at last fully celebrate the arrival of our Lord many years ago, and we will move into a new season of the church year in which we focus less on preparing ourselves for His arrival and more on living during the time following His arrival. This particular season of Advent, we've been preparing ourselves in two ways: as we re-tell the story of the first coming of Jesus, we examine ourselves to make sure we're really ready to celebrate His coming, but as we do that we're also examining ourselves to make sure we're ready for His return. There are parallel Advents at work in the story of the church. There's the remembrance of the Advent of Christmas, and then there's the expectation of the Advent of Jesus' second coming. There is the Christmas story and the Revelation story, the familiar tale of the baby in the manger and the shocking tale of the one whose eyes are like blazing fire, whose mouth holds a double-edged sword, whose voice is like the sound of rushing waters, who holds the keys of death and hell.

And so we've been telling these two tales side by side, and as vastly different as they are in so many ways, we've seen in the midst of that difference that they share some very important similarities. They are both stories about the arrival of the Messiah, and certain circumstances surrounding those arrivals are essentially the same. In particular, the ways we make ourselves ready and the ways we respond to His coming are very much the same, in spite of all of the other differences. We can't make our Messiah arrive, but we can prepare the soil, we can prepare to welcome Him, we can learn how to watch for Him, we can make a highway in the desert for Him.

As we've told these parallel stories, we've seen that the core concern of God's people is how to wait. We are a waiting people; we're waiting for God to complete the great work He started. The Jews were waiting for the Messiah to arrive when Jesus was born; we're waiting for Jesus our Messiah to return. And so we have lifted our voices with God's people in all ages and asked, "How long?" How long will it be, Sovereign Lord, until you complete this work and make things right and redeem your beloved creation? We wait, and we listened in while John the Baptist called the people of Israel to make their ways ready, to repent; and we listened in as Jesus told the churches in Revelation that they too were called to wait purposefully, faithfully, using the time to make things ready.

And then we told the stories of how we are a worshipping people, and our worship proclaims and joins in with the work of God's arriving Messiah. We heard the songs of worship sung by Mary and Anna and Simeon and the angels and the shepherds at the time of Jesus' birth, and through the ears of John the Revelator we heard the worship of the heavenly choirs surrounding the throne of God. "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power."

And finally, last Sunday, we watched as a cosmic drama unfolded, as evil rebelled against God, as the dragon reared its head and struck out against God's heroic anointed one. We saw Herod the Great massacre a town full of infants as he tried to stop God's work, and then we saw in John's Revelation how Satan attacked, and how evil continued to rebel in disaster after disaster. And we saw that this struggle against evil is what motivates the urgency in our cry of "How long?" And John told us that this hole in our understanding of history can only be filled by Jesus, the Lamb Who Was Slain.

Our response to evil's struggles is to follow Jesus' example, and to triumph through His blood, through our blood, and through the word of our testimony.

Today we come near the end of our waiting. In both our stories, the Messiah is arriving, and God's promises are being fulfilled. That would seem to be the end of it, right? The Messiah has come, and now everything is done! But no, there is still our response. There is still much for us to see in these two Advents. "Let every heart prepare Him room," we sing in *Joy to the World*, and even after He arrives there is the work of making room for Him.

As I was reflecting on our texts for today and about Christmas in general, it struck me how many things in our world and in our lives receive so much more fanfare than the arrival of the Messiah. The launch of a new model of iPad generates far more buzz than the birth of Jesus did. Though, to be fair, Apple has spent far more time and money on marketing than Jesus ever did. And why shouldn't they? An iPad will change your life! It makes everything so much simpler, and it connects you with people you love, and it helps you get work done, and it slices and dices. I'm not picking on iPads if you like them, because we could put any number of things in its place. We get out the trumpets to announce all sorts of new toys and gadgets and movies and experiences. Or maybe it's a new relationship that will change your life and "save" you. Or whatever political party or candidate you support; they're the one who can make everything right, or we're going to fight a war to save the world, or here's our new program that will fix it all. How many little "messiahs" arrive in various forms that generate so much more excitement than the arrival of the true Messiah did? How many false advents do we anticipate and prepare for and plan for more than we do the only Advent that really matters?

I ask because it was a relevant question in both the First and the Second Advents of our Lord Jesus. The true Messiah arrives in the midst of any number of pretenders to His throne, and our task is to maintain our loyalty and our focus on the true one. We read from Revelation 19, which is the part of that story in which the Messiah arrives in a grand victory procession and battle to overthrow His foes. It's a chapter that it's easy to get excited about, because at long last, God's people get to have their vengeance against their persecutors as we follow the glorious Christ in battle. But wait, no, we have to look carefully at what John tells us. Here's what we see if we were to continue the reading in verse 19: "Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to wage war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet who had performed the signs on its behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest were killed with the sword coming out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh."

God's people do indeed follow their Lord in a great army, but the only one doing the fighting in Jesus, the rider on the white horse, and even He doesn't do much fighting. He simply and completely overcomes His enemies with the sword of His word. So again, our role is only to follow Him. We want to take up arms against God's enemies, but that's not what we're called to do.

Instead, the more significant message for us comes *before* the arrival of this mighty Messiah. You may remember from last week that John told us about a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon at her feet, giving birth to the Messiah in a dramatic retelling of our nativity story. If we had

continued reading the chapters that followed, we would see that evil offered its own perverse parody of Mary, the mother of Jesus. She's dressed in splendid attire that is only a pale imitation of Mary's radiant clothing, and instead of being pursued by a dragon, she rides a blasphemous beast. She carries with her all sorts of abominable things and tempts all nations of the earth to drink from her cup of filth. Her name is Babylon, and she offers all sorts of pomp and glitter and hope of salvation from all kinds of sources, none of which are the true Messiah. In short, she is the mother of false little messiahs, things to get excited about and hope for that will ultimately let you down.

The world that is in rebellion against God wants nothing more than to provide a convincing alternative to God. John the Revelator calls this Babylon. John shows us that the coming of the true Messiah involves the systematic de-construction and judgment of Babylon. These false messiahs must be cleared out and rejected to make room for the Second Advent of Jesus. And so in the chapters leading up to our glorious arrival of the triumphant Christ, we watch as Babylon with her temptations is destroyed, overthrown, cast into the depths. Her ruin brings great lament from many people, from the kings and rulers, from the merchants who made money off of her, from the sailors who traded in her goods. She brought all kinds of fine luxuries to the ends of the earth, from food to clothes to building materials to trinkets, and, oh yes, slaves as well. Her glory is built on injustice. She seems beautiful and rich, but you don't have to look closely to see how offensive she is.

The arrival of the Messiah takes place in the context of Babylon, and it is up to us to be careful enough to reject Babylon's false messiahs and maintain our focus on the true one. In our telling of the First Advent, that familiar Christmas story, we hear hints of the presence of Babylon at that arrival of Jesus. His birth takes place in the midst of Babylon's authority; Joseph and Mary are forced to take a nonsensical journey of several days while Mary is in the final days of her pregnancy in order to fulfill Babylon's bureaucratic expectations. There is a census being conducted, and why would the Romans want a census other than to better know how to control and tax the people? The census has people all in a dither, but you don't have a choice; you've got to do what the governor says. And so we find that at the birth of the Son of God, everyone of importance is too busy with their other activities to honor Him. Only some shepherds, near the bottom of society, come to pay their respects to the holy family. The unspoken point is that Caesar is lord in this realm. There is physically no room for hospitality to a rival Messiah; He must sleep in the manger.

The First Advent takes place in the context of Babylon's authority, while the Second Advent takes place in the context of Babylon's overthrow. In both cases there is a conflict and a contrast between the Messiah of the kingdom of God and the alternative messiahs of the kingdoms of Babylon. There can be no accommodation made when those alternative messiahs try to steal some of the fanfare of our true Messiah. This is the constant challenge of Advent: to remember that it is Christ, and only Christ, who is our Messiah, and we must reject as false any alternatives. His coming is a threat to all of the Babylons of this world, because He reveals their shabbiness and their injustices for what they are, and He has promised to tear them down and build His eternal kingdom in their place.

In His first arrival, He delivered us from our slavery to sin and opened to us the opportunity of adoption into God's family. In His second arrival, He will banish forever sin and evil, and He will establish a city of redeemed people who bear His name and live in His light forever. There will be no place for the shabby imitations offered by Babylon. And so as we celebrate His First Advent and wait

for His Second, we are in the awkward position of preparing the way and then following Christ's lead. It's hard to know, sometimes, where the line is when dealing with the Babylons of this world. We're not expected to withdraw from them completely, because we are called into the world in mission. We need to prepare the way with our lives. And so we challenge those false messiahs with our mission and our witness, and then we follow our Lord in His work of redemption. And so, as the song says, "let every heart prepare Him room." At the end of our Revelation, Jesus says, "Yes, I am coming soon." And our response, as John the Revelator leads us, is, "Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!"



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