

Oh little town of Bethlehem / Looks like another silent night / Above your deep and dreamless sleep / A giant star lights up the sky / And while you're lying in the dark / There shines an everlasting light / For the King has left His throne / And is sleeping in a manger tonight

Oh Bethlehem, what you have missed while you were sleeping / For God became a man / And stepped into your world today / Oh Bethlehem, you will go down in history / As a city with no room for its King / While you were sleeping¹

For those of you familiar with contemporary Christian music, you probably recognize those words as the lyrics to the song “While You Were Sleeping” by the group Casting Crowns. I’ve always loved that song. I love the way that it plays on the traditional Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” I love the progression from the manger to the cross to modern day America that it makes over verses two and three. I love the way it challenges us to reconsider our values and priorities in light of God’s law.

It came on as we started listening to Christmas music this weekend. And it occurred to me that it’s a really fantastic description of what the season of Advent is all about in the Lutheran church and, really, throughout the history of Christianity.

Which is kinda ironic when you think about it. Casting Crowns is a band that calls Eagle's Landing First Baptist Church their home, a congregation that has no liturgical roots whatsoever.

And yet, they’ve come to the same Biblical conclusion that we have. Advent is about more than what we often make of it. Advent is about more than having a season to sing Christmas carols in church. Advent is about more than having an excuse to decorate with Christmas trees and candle wreaths. Advent is about more, even, than just preparing for the birth of Christ.

You see, the word “advent” comes from a Latin word that means “to come into.” And Advent is about examining and appreciating any time that Christ comes into our world and our lives. And yes, that does include Christmas.

But it also includes Christ coming into his ministry. It includes Christ coming into the city of Jerusalem on Palm Sunday in order to be crucified five days later. And as our Gospel lesson alluded, it includes Christ coming back into our world on the last day.

So yes, Advent is tied heavily to Christmas. But it’s tied in such a way that when we look at Christmas, we see only the first example of when Christ has come into our world. And if we look a little further in scripture, we see many more examples of Christ coming into our world. And when we look through these examples we start to see a pattern emerge. We start to see a repeating theme.

And that’s where this song by Casting Crowns really hits the nail on the head. For the pattern we see is that of humanity completely failing to recognize it’s own Lord and Savior. Over and over and over again, humanity is caught sleeping while God shows up and does something amazing.

The first time is, of course, at Christmas. And in a way, that’s the most understandable of all the times that God’s advent into the world is overlooked. After all, he came in a conspicuously inconspicuous way. The son of a very ordinary young woman in a very ordinary location on a very ordinary day. And yet, there was also so much that was extraordinary about his birth as well.

The fulfillment of prophecy. Dozens of specific prophecies fulfilled. Born of a virgin. Born in Bethlehem. Born to a descendent of King David. A new righteous branch from the stump of Jesse, David’s father.

The people knew the Messiah was coming. They knew what town he was coming to. What family he was coming from. All they didn’t know was the day, and yet that was announced to them with angels in the heavens and a star in the sky. As ordinary as Jesus’ birth was, they had no excuse for letting it pass unnoticed.

¹ Hall, Mark. “While You Were Sleeping.” *Lifesong*. Beach Street Records, 2005.

The same could be said of his crucifixion. Three years of signs and wonders pointing to him as the Christ, the Son of God. Again, prophecy after prophecy fulfilled in their presence. Everything that Jesus said and did, everything that happened around him, pointing so clearly to him as the Messiah that even a convicted criminal executed next to him and a Roman soldier standing at his feet could see that he was the Son of God. And yet his own disciples watched him perform miracles and said, "Who is this that even the wind and waves obey his command?" Who do you think?

So it's not terribly surprising that when Jesus talks about his final advent into the world, he says that there will, unfortunately, be people surprised by it. That just as there were people surprised by the wrath of God at the coming of the flood during the days of Noah, there will be people surprised at the coming of the wrath of God on the last day as well.

And there shouldn't have been anyone surprised by the flood. Not if you know the timeline of the Old Testament. Did you know that Adam was still alive when Noah's father was born? It's true. Adam and Lamech, Noah's father, were alive at the same time for 80 years. Which means that the story of the fall of man was not some distant memory passed down through dozens of generations before it got to Noah. Noah's father might very well have talked to the man who first experienced God's punishment. As did countless others.

The people of Noah's day knew that God judges evil. God kills evildoers. And yet they were surprised when the flood came. Why? Because it's our nature. It is part of our sinful human nature to reject the coming of the Lord. It is part of our sinful nature to reject that there is a master and he will return. That we are not the masters here. God is. And we don't control where we spend eternity and when we get there. God does.

We hate it. It takes us out of control. It forces us to submit to God almighty. And so long as this sinful flesh remains, we will never fully accept it. We will never fully accept that we are not God.

But that doesn't mean that we'll end up like the crowds who scoffed at Noah in drowned in the flood. That doesn't mean that we're as hard hearted as those who crucified the Lord and called for his blood on their heads. That doesn't mean we have no room for our Lord and have sent the mother of our Lord to give birth in a barn. We are different than those who sit slumbering while the Lord returns.

Because for those of us who are in Christ, God never stopped coming. God has not just come into our world. He has come into our lives. He has come into our very being. Over and over and over again, he comes to us.

By Word and Sacrament, Christ comes to us every day of our lives. Every time we kneel at that altar for communion, we have an advent with our God. We have Christ coming into our world and coming into us under bread and wine.

Every time we open scripture, the Word made flesh comes to us in the Word of God. Speaking to us not just words of judgement. But words of life and hope and promise. Words that assure us that we are not going to be drowned in God's judgement like those people of Noah's day, but saved by the ark of Holy Baptism. Rescued like those eight soul and brought into a new heavens and new earth where sin is washed away.

Advent is not just about seeing a baby in a manger. It's about seeing Christ in our lives every moment of every day. It's about seeing Christ fulfill his final promise to all those he calls his disciples: "I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Christ tells us to be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect. We can't predict the Lord's return. But he can make us ever more ready for it. He can make us ever more ready for it, by giving us those mini-advents every single day. By giving us those moments in his Word or at his altar when we say with confidence, "Yes, God came. Yes, God will come. And yes, God is here."

Behold, he comes. So let us come and walk in the light of the Lord. Amen.