I’ll admit it! The Advent season can be a confusing time for Christians! That is because we are often on two completely different paths preparing for the same event. Whichever path we follow, we are going to end up at a celebration of December 25th - the day selected to celebrate the birth of Jesus, some 2000 years ago.

The first path to Christmas is one laid out by this world. Its preparation for Christmas is only loosely connected to the birth of Jesus. Still, the world has made Jesus’ coming into a time of high expectations. We expect to give and receive thoughtful gifts. We expect fine food, joyful music, lavish decorations, bright lights, family peace, and moving sentiment. We expect Christmas to be a fantastic day.

The world’s path to December 25th is largely based on past Christmases, mostly remembered with great nostalgia. Even though the perfect Christmas’s a myth, the world strives to attain it. In fact, our whole economic system rests upon the unrelenting effort to make Christmas what the world thinks it should be. Over the years, the world has adopted and adapted many customs into their preparations and celebration.

Often it bears such a similarity to the other path to Christmas that they are confused and mistaken for one another, even by Christians. But what sets the world’s path to Christmas apart from the other is this. Although there are always high expectations for Christmas, they are rarely met. That is because the world’s Christmas is founded on shallow hopes. In the end, what lasting joy can there be in ordinary things, food, and drink? We can have them on any day we choose.

The other path to Christmas is known to us as Advent. Advent preparation for Christmas is inseparably linked to Jesus’ coming. Advent could not exist if Jesus did not come as a baby. That is what the path of Advent is all about to Christians - getting ready for the coming of Jesus. In fact, Advent focusses on three comings of Jesus. Of necessity, that means that our preparation is unlike the world’s in many ways.

That is because we understand what Jesus’ coming means to us and all mankind. We see that there is more to Christmas than just the heart-warming tale of a child born in meager circumstances. We see this particular coming in context with the other two times Jesus comes to mankind.

This morning, let’s not dwell on the way this world prepares for Christmas. Let’s remind ourselves of what his coming truly means so that our celebration at Christmas is deep and rich, eternally meaningful and satisfying! To gain this proper understanding, we have to consider the comings of Jesus backward - from his final coming to his first.

We correctly call his final coming the last days. And the picture the Lord gives us of these days is not very comforting. In the time before he returns to this earth, baffling events will take place: There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what’s coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken.

Before the Lord comes back, all nature will announce his arrival. There will be signs in the heavens above. There will be signs in the seas around us. There will be signs in the ground we stand on. Jesus warns that the worst of all signs will be the steadily growing selfishness of mankind and the lack of love between human beings. It will especially be a
period of intense persecution for Christians. 

Taken all together, the people of this world will be in mental turmoil all the time. Although designed to give the strongest possible warning of the Lord’s return and the need to prepare for him, most will miss the message and continue to reject the Lord and his love. Their eyes and hearts will be focused on how to fix or escape the trials of that age.

No answers will come and so confusion, terror, apprehension and great mental anguish will come upon them. Suddenly, however, all will be clear: **At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory.** When Jesus appears with the heavenly host surrounding him, exhibiting his power by raising the dead, mankind will finally realize what is about to take place and many will weep!

Our realization will be totally different. When these things begin to take place, Jesus says: **Stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.** For unbelievers, this is their moment of final judgment and condemnation. They are about to start their eternities in hell. They should be mourning. But not us!

Jesus’ coming marks the beginning of the best of times for us! This is the hour of our redemption, our final deliverance. From that moment on, none of the effects of sin will have any bearing on us. We will no longer be mortal. We will no longer feel pain of any kind - either physical or mental. All worry will be banished. All friction and animosity between us will cease. I cannot tell you exactly what heaven will be like, but we know very well what heaven will not be like!

Best of all, with sin completely purged from our resurrection bodies, we will be able to approach our God and Lord in perfect peace. We will long to be in his presence forevermore because his all-embracing love will engulf us and bring us a feeling we have never known before. Jesus’ coming at that time will be the richest blessing we have ever received.

So the signs of his coming should not alarm us. Rather, we view them with eager anticipation - much as we are encouraged when we observe trees budding out at the end of winter. It tells us that spring is near. So it is with the signs of the end. Jesus says **When you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near.**

Jesus’ final coming will be pure joy for us! But why? Why us? Of all the people in this world, why should we receive this reward while others don't? Does the Lord bear some grudge against them? Nothing could be further from the truth! **God so love the world that he sent his Son to be their Savior.** So what happened? Why will they be turned away from heaven’s door and condemned to the misery of hell?

It will not be God’s fault! Jesus earnestly came to them with his offer of salvation. If they had held to Jesus by faith, a room in the Father’s house would have been readied for them. But when Jesus came to them through the Gospel, they wanted no part of him. Because they had no part in that coming, they have no part in his final coming.

By the grace of God and the powerful working of the Holy Spirit, we did not turn him away when Jesus came to us. We did not reject his salvation. That does not mean that we made a better choice and so we deserved eternal life. We are saved by God's undeserved love alone, without our doing. By his doing, we believed when Jesus came to us in Word and Sacrament and so became part of his everlasting kingdom.

This is a rock solid, absolute truth! Jesus says: **Heaven and earth will pass away, but my Words will never pass away.** And that brings us to the coming of Jesus’ most on our minds at this time of year. What relation does it have to his coming into our hearts by faith and his coming at the last day to take us home? Everything! You see, the final two comings would be impossible without the first. The three comings are a unit. They must all take place for any of them to have meaning.

We understand that Jesus was not born to give downtrodden mankind hope that things
can get better. He did not grow up to be an example of purity and piety for us to follow in our lives. He was not the poster boy for love between human beings or the nations of the earth we live on. Those are common misunderstandings held by many people who prepare for Christmas in the world’s way.

Jesus was born to live and die for us! Only his perfect life - transferred to us by faith - could give us the sure and certain hope that new life with God is ours because our sins no longer can condemn us. Only his sinless death - credited to our account by faith - could insure that life on this earth is not the totality of our existence, that a better life in heaven awaits us.

True, Jesus does show us how we are to love one another with his life of love. But more importantly, he shows us the love God has for us - sinners who deserve nothing but hell. Our trust in him is not for this life only. As Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15: If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. Our hope in him is his guarantee that we have life everlasting!

This is what we must understand about Jesus’ coming - any of them. If we do not understand what his coming means, then we are in danger! That is why Jesus warns: Be careful, or that day will close on you unexpectedly like a trap. If we do not live as if his coming changes us now, we are not prepared for our forever. If we live only for this life, we do not have real life.

When you understand what Jesus’ coming means, then you will follow the Advent path to Christmas and you will truly be prepared for his coming! Your Advent preparation will fill you with the real joy of Jesus’ coming. Amen.

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