

O Lord, how shall I meet Thee,
How welcome Thee aright?
Thy people long to greet Thee,
My hope, my heart's Delight!
Oh, kindle, Lord, most holy,
Thy lamp within my breast
To do in spirit lowly
All that may please Thee best.

At the end of the church year we focus on the last day when the Son of God will come in judgment. We focus on the great warnings of our Lord to stay awake and be watchful for his return. This is how we end the church year. This is also how we begin the church year. Advent means coming. Jesus is coming. He is the Coming One. He will come to judge the living and the dead. In the meantime he comes to us in his Word and sacraments, wherever two or three are gathered in his name. And this is because he came in the flesh at the fullness of time to redeem poor sinners from sin, death, and condemnation. If the end of the church year taught us to stay awake and be watchful for the coming of the Lord, then the beginning of the church year teaches us to thirst and long for his coming. With our lamps lit by the flame of faith, we recognize that we need the oil of his gospel to keep us ready for the coming salvation. In fact, we can not please God without him. This is why we long for him. We long to celebrate his holy birth. We long for him to come to us in his Spirit, Word, body, and blood. And we long to meet him face to face just as he has promised.

Thy Zion strews before Thee
Green boughs and fairest palms,
And I, too, will adore Thee
With joyous songs and psalms.
My heart shall bloom forever
For Thee with praises new
And from Thy name shall never
Withhold the honor due.

When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a beast of burden, his people went before him, waving palm branches and putting their cloaks on the ground. They were singing, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Hosanna to the Highest!" In other words, they were asking Jesus to save them, blessing him who comes in the name of the Lord. Some assume that these are the same people who would crucify him by the end of that week. Perhaps there were some hypocrites mixed into the crowd, going along with the shouts of praise. After all, there have always been false believers mixed in with the outward fellowship of the church. But make no mistake. When Jesus came into Jerusalem he was meeting his bride. This was his Zion, his holy church. You know her by what she proclaims. She proclaims salvation in Jesus' name. She sings hymns and psalms that speak of what he has done to save poor sinners. She declares the name of the Lord, the only name by which we can be saved. Wherever you hear this precious gospel proclaimed and people gathering around to learn it and confess it, then you can know that there is the church.

If our Lord's church was present in that crowd of people meeting Jesus in Jerusalem, then we can be certain that his church is present among us as well. You can be certain that as surely as you hear and confess the gospel of your Lord who gave himself for you to save you from sin and condemnation, as surely as you rely on his words of pardon and grace, then you are a member of his holy church. This isn't just some social club. You aren't merely caught up in the moment. No, you are meeting your Lord with the same certainty his church met him on that great day in Jerusalem. You too can adore him with joyous songs and psalms. Your heart also blooms with a new song, holding his name as your greatest treasure. No matter how sad you are, no matter how much your sins bothers you, you can know by your Savior's Word that he comes even to you. Just as we sing:

I lay in fetters, groaning,
Thou com'st to set me free;
I stood, my shame bemoaning,
Thou com'st to honor me;
A glory Thou dost give me,
A treasure safe on high,
That will not fail or leave me
As earthly riches fly.

When Jesus sent his disciples into the next village, he told them that they would find a donkey tied up with a colt. He commanded them, "Untie them and bring them to me." What Jesus sent his disciples to do with that beast of burden symbolizes exactly what he does for us. He sent his apostles out to preach the gospel, which frees sinners from the burden of sin and guilt by the power of his birth, life, death, and resurrection. And just as the apostles put Jesus on that beast of burden, they put him on us as well. When we listen to their preaching we put on Christ. We were first clothed with him in our baptism where his blood washes us clean and he gives us his Holy Spirit. And we continue to carry him around as we trust his faithful Word. Yet, his burden isn't heavy. Despite how heavy your crosses in this life may seem, his yoke remains easy and light for you. Because he remains kind to you.

So don't be ashamed to bear your Savior's name, especially if the world looks down on you. Because when you wear Christ as your shield and armor, then he is honoring you. He is not ashamed to place himself on you and lead you through this dark valley of tears here on earth even as he preserves for you his own glory and treasure in heaven. The things of this world rust and break. Even some of the strongest bonds and friendships fall apart. But Jesus remains faithful. He is driven by his own divine love, just as he always has been. Again, as we sing:

Love caused Thy incarnation,
Love brought Thee down to me;
Thy thirst for my salvation
Procured my liberty.
O love beyond all telling,
That led Thee to embrace,

In love all love excelling,
Our lost and fallen race!

God is love. This is no empty notion of love, like a romance that is here one day and gone the next. This love doesn't grow cold. It is a self-giving and self-sacrificing love. It is his great desire to save us. It is his unspeakable compassion to rescue us from sin and live with us forever. This is why the coming of our Lord teaches us to long for him. It's because he longs for us. He thirsts for our salvation. He embraces, with love excelling all love, our lost and fallen race. Remember this. Remember it during this season when the daylight reaches its lowest point. Remember it when you find that you have lost any joy in this life, either by death, disease, persecution, or because of your own sinful mistakes. Remember it when you long for a time when things seemed happier. Jesus longs for you, for your salvation, for your comfort and security.

Rejoice, then, ye sad-hearted,
Who sit in deepest gloom,
Who mourn o'er joys departed
And tremble at your doom.
Despair not, He is near you,
Yea, standing at the door,
Who best can help and cheer you
And bids you weep no more.

Jesus stands at the door and knocks, and he promises to anyone who hears his voice and opens the door that he will come and eat with him. But how can we meet him? How can we open the door? Our sins have made us completely unworthy to receive him into our homes. We don't pray as we should. We don't pay attention to his Word as we should. We so easily get distracted by other knockings – on our phones, on the news, at the gossip corner, or in our own imaginations. This is enough to drive someone to despair. Who am I to have Jesus come to me? I haven't lived a life worthy of his acceptance. I try to dedicate my life to him. I try to devote time to reading his Word and talking about him in my conversations. But it often happens that I get tired or even bored. And the desires of my sinful flesh attract me to carnal and empty pleasures, leaving me only with guilt and shame. O wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Again, remember this. What moves him to knock on your door? What moves him to call out to you from his holy Word? The same thing that moved him to share your human nature, to ride into Jerusalem, to take up his cross, and to die for you. He knows your weaknesses. He knows your sins. He knows your inability to draw him by your own powers. But

Ye need not toil or languish
Nor ponder day and night
How in the midst of anguish
Ye draw Him by your might.
He comes, He comes all willing,

Moved by His love alone,
Your woes and troubles stilling;
For all to Him are known.

When the people praised Jesus riding into Jerusalem, they sang of the salvation he was coming to bring. You might wonder whether they understood what they were singing. Did they even know what kind of salvation Jesus was bringing? Perhaps there were some in the crowd who only wanted a political, earthly savior, someone who would make their lives more comfortable in this world. But the true Zion was there. The true church of Christ, the sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd – they were there singing about his salvation. Sure, they didn't know how that week would end. They didn't fully understand how Jesus would bring salvation. But one thing is for sure. They weren't just looking for a worldly savior. They needed salvation from sin and guilt. In that great assembly were those who carried heavy loads in their consciences, fearing the fierce judgment of God. And they saw in Jesus their only hope for peace and forgiveness. The same is true for those in his church today.

Sin's debt, that fearful burden,
Let not your souls distress;
Your guilt the Lord will pardon
And cover by His grace.
He comes, for men procuring
The peace of sin forgiven,
For all God's sons securing
Their heritage in heaven.

That great crowd in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday would be like scattered sheep the following Friday. The enemies of Christ would rejoice, assuring themselves that they had defeated him. This is how it must be for his little flock in this world. It seems as if the devil has gotten the upper hand. When so many people fall away, when love for God and neighbor grows cold, when Jesus is placed on the same level as any other religion invented by men, and people buy into these lies, then it seems like the enemies have won. The temptation to give up, give in, and compromise on the truth of the gospel has never been fiercer. Will there be any Christians left in a generation? Yes, there will, no matter how small. This is our Lord's promise. He didn't come into Jerusalem on a warhorse. He came in meekness, on a beast of burden, to teach us that his reign is not measured by earthly stats and numbers. He will preserve his little flock, and he will continue to come to her in his Word and sacrament, no matter how small and despised she is by this world.

What though the foes be raging,
Heed not their craft and spite;
Your Lord, the battle waging,
Will scatter all their might.
He comes, a King most glorious,
And all His earthly foes

In vain His course victorious
Endeavor to oppose.

When we gather around the Word and sacraments of our Lord Jesus, we are longing for his coming. We long for him precisely because he first longed for us and came to us in flesh and blood. Growing in his mother's womb, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger, being baptized in the Jordan River, going without food and drink, bearing our temptations from the hand of the devil, healing diseases, preaching the gospel, riding into Jerusalem, walking up to Calvary, hanging on the cross, resting in the tomb, rising from the dead, and ascending into heaven – this is our God coming to us in his flesh and blood. And he continues to come to us by his precious Word. This world may yawn at his Word and mock his name. But to those who tremble at his Word and fear his name, he will rise as the bright Sun of Righteousness with healing in his wings. This is what we, his Zion, long to see. And even before we see it we already love it, because he first loved us.

He comes to judge the nations,
A terror to His foes,
A Light of consolations
And blessed Hope to those
Who love the Lord's appearing.
O glorious Sun, now come,
Send forth Thy beams most cheering,
And guide us safely home. Amen.