

Dec. 17, 2023

Sermon on the Collect for Advent 3 (and to a lesser degree, hymn 76 “On Jordan’s banks”)

“Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us.”

What a great line: “Stir up thy power, O Lord,
and with great might come among us.”

Our sermons in Advent are coming from the Collect of the Day
and from our Advent hymns.

Today we’re going to look closely at this Collect for
the 3rd Sunday of Advent, and I’ll throw in a little bit
of the hymn we just sang, “On Jordan’s banks.”

Let’s start with a little history.

Who here knows what the Gelasian Sacramentary is?
(I’ll just say right now that until this week
I had no idea what the Gelasian Sacramentary was.)

It’s an ancient manuscript of liturgical prayers
for the priest to use as he leads worship.

Basically, it’s an ancient version of that book we have on the altar,
but the Gelasian Sacramentary is the second oldest manuscript
of liturgical prayers we have in the whole Western Church.

It dates back to the 700s and is named for Pope Gelasius I
who served in the 400s,
so the assumption is that some of the prayers in the book
date back to Pope Gelasius in the 400s
and maybe even before him.

Now, if you were to read a translation of the Gelasian Sacramentary,
guess what prayer you would find in it for the season of Advent?
(Boy, it’d be a huge letdown if it wasn’t our collect, wouldn’t it?)

Dec. 17, 2023

Sermon on the Collect for Advent 3 (and to a lesser degree, hymn 76 “On Jordan’s banks”)

But it IS in there!

Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us;
and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let thy bountiful
grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ
our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be honor and glory,
world without end. Amen.

And it doesn’t just show up in THIS ancient manuscript.

All over the Western Church this prayer appears thru the centuries.

In the Gallican Bobbio (I don’t know what that is, either).

In the Sarum Missal (I kind of know that one),

and on and on through the centuries until Thomas Cranmer
wrote the first English Book of Common Prayer in 1549.

Today’s Advent prayer is in Cranmer’s 1549 book, in the 1662 revision,
and in each version of our American Prayer Books.

Now, it’s not that the WHOLE church knows this prayer

but it IS to say that every Advent for 1,500 years give or take,
some part of the Church has prayed this prayer.

And it also means that for every one of our 131 years Holy Trinity
has prayed this same Advent prayer:

“Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us...”

+++

Dec. 17, 2023

Sermon on the Collect for Advent 3 (and to a lesser degree, hymn 76 "On Jordan's banks")

Now, just because a prayer is old does not mean it is useful,
and every year ancient prayers (and hymns and anthems)
are forgotten by the Church, never to be prayed or sung again.

So why has this one survived,
and why should we continue to ask God what this prayer asks?

I think the power of the prayer is that it has a kind of 1-2 punch to it,
which is a very Advent kind of thing.

Advent is not just the season to prepare for Jesus' first coming,
that humble birth in a manger in Bethlehem,
but is also the season to prepare for Jesus' second coming,
when he shall come again in glory
to judge both the living and the dead.

So, Advent brings out all the warm fuzzies of Christmas
but also reminds us that sweet little baby Jesus is also
the judge of all creation.

Today's collect brings out that dual meaning, that 1-2 punch:

"Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us"

- that's the power and glory of the 2nd coming -

"and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins,

let thy bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us"

- that's the humble birth of his first coming.

+++

Dec. 17, 2023

Sermon on the Collect for Advent 3 (and to a lesser degree, hymn 76 "On Jordan's banks")

But I hear another layer of meaning in this prayer.

Not just the 1-2 punch of Jesus' first and second coming,
but a kind of longing for God's power to move in us
that is both external and internal.

When I pray that first phrase,

I feel the conviction of the prophets we've been hearing from Advent.
The moral righteousness of Isaiah, of Mary,
and especially of John the Baptist as he stands
on the stormy banks of the Jordan River.

Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might come among us!!!

Come and put an end to the slaughter in Gaza and Israel.

Come, O Lord, and put an end to the cold winter war in Ukraine.

Come to this country, Lord, where our greed and anger leads us
to ignore the suffering of our neighbors,
sometimes even to INCREASE the suffering of our neighbors,
and where our selfishness is spoiling our water and our sky.

Stir up thy power, O Lord, and with great might

heal all the brokenness that is OUT THERE. All the sin.

All the evil we see so clearly.

+ + +

Dec. 17, 2023

Sermon on the Collect for Advent 3 (and to a lesser degree, hymn 76 "On Jordan's banks")

But then I remember - I'm not a prophet. I'm not Isaiah or Mary or John.

I'm not even all that righteous. What I am...is a sinner.

What I am is a person with the same potential for selfishness and tribalism that I want to condemn in others.

If I'm honest with myself I have to admit that if
the stable and comfortable circumstances of my life were as
UNstable and UNcomfortable as the people I'm so quick to judge,
I might be every bit as bloodthirsty, every bit as dishonest,
every bit as divisive as those people I want God to stir up
with His divine might.

And it's when I remember my OWN sinfulness that my prayer changes.

My prayer softens, because now I don't want God to come
with great power and judge me for my sins.

I don't see myself as an evil, selfish monster in need of judgement.

I see myself as a VICTIM of sin.

I see myself, to use the collect's language,
as "sorely hindered" by my sin.

And if I am sorely hindered by MY sins,
well, maybe all those other people are, too.

Maybe we are all sorely hindered,
all in desperate need of Jesus' mercy and bountiful grace.

+++

Dec. 17, 2023

Sermon on the Collect for Advent 3 (and to a lesser degree, hymn 76 "On Jordan's banks")

Friends, our world is deeply afflicted with sin. Always has been.

And moral clarity, prophetic clarity,
is one of the gifts God sometimes gives us.

But remember that the same sinfulness you see out there...
is also present in here.

Remember that whenever you pray for grace and mercy
to weather the difficult seasons of YOUR OWN life,
you should pray for that same grace and mercy
for all those other sinners. The ones OUT THERE.
And you should start with the people you think of as your enemies.

For thou art our salvation, Lord,
our refuge and our great reward,
without thy grace we waste away,
like flowers that wither and decay.

Amen.