

Revelation 1:3

First Sunday in Advent (Series B)

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 64:1–9; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 11:1–10

Guided By His Word

December 3, 2023

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”

Dear friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed;

Since 1965, the United Nations has designated each year for some special observance. In previous years we have had the year of the Volunteer; the Year of the Woman; The Year of the Disabled. In the past few years, they have focussed more on things related to the earth itself. The present year, 2023 is the Year of Millets. Next year has been designated as the Year of the Camelids—think camels, llamas and alpacas. Some of these observances make sense, and indeed do seem to profile an issue of importance. Others may be a bit on the trite side. Whether or not you agree with their choices, the idea is that through a special yearly observance, people can be made aware of a special need or group, in an effort to strengthen our appreciation of this need.

In the United States, 1983 was designated as the national Year of the Bible by President Ronald Reagan. My first thought is, “my, how times have changed!” The Bible has been set aside by so many, who choose to follow their own idea of ‘spirituality’. Although it is still the best selling book of all time, the bible is more often something sitting on the shelf than the living and active Word of God that it should be for His people. That is why today, as we begin this new church year, I urge us to celebrate this year as our year of the Bible. As people of faith we want to be Bible-based people. The psalmist says: ***“Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.”*** (Psalm 119:97, ESV) We want to listen as it read and preached upon in our worship. We want to sing it in our hymns and liturgy. We want to study it in Bible Class and in personal devotion. We want to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest that Word, and to make it our heart’s delight, too.

Since the invention of the printing press, millions upon millions of books have been written and continue to be written. Go into almost any home, and you will likely find at least one book, if not a whole bookcase full of them. But of all the books that have ever been written, there is not one of them which has had the impact upon our world, nor which holds as much importance for our lives today as does the Bible. No book is as unique as our Bible. As I said, it is the best selling book in history. It has been burned and banned, but it has survived every effort that has ever been made to destroy it. It has been translated in whole or in part into nearly 2,000 different languages and dialects, with linguists working in more than a thousand other dialects. But what really sets the bible apart from all other books, including all other so-called holy writings like the Koran, the wisdom of Buddha, or even the book of Mormon is the fact that it is not the product of human wisdom. It is God’s word to us. Here God Himself speaks to us to encourage us, to comfort us, to admonish and correct us. Here God tells us how far short we are of His holiness because of our sin. But best of all, this book tells us of God’s boundless love for us and of the forgiveness and life that are ours through His Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. John tells us why God gave us His Word when he says, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit: ***“but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”*** (John 20:31, ESV) The bible, from first to last, is all about Jesus. It tells us that God’s love for us is so great, that He came into our world of sin and death to rescue and deliver His beloved people from sin and death. It tells us of the great and perfect sacrifice of the Lamb of God, the Saviour who gave Himself in the place of sinners, suffering our death, but then rising to give us life in His powerful resurrection. It assures us that nothing in all creation ***“will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** (Romans 8:39, ESV)

How wonderful it is that God speaks to us in the pages of Holy Scripture to guide, strengthen and encourage us in our lives as His people. How blessed we are to have His Word to bring us to faith and to keep us strong in our faith. How blessed we are to know through this life-giving word all that God has done, is doing and will do for our salvation. Is it any wonder, then that John should say: ***“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”*** While John was speaking of the prophecy that is the book of Revelation, his words apply to all of Scripture. The bible has been a blessing to more people than we could even begin to count. It has brought hope and peace to people lost in despair. It has brought some of the most adamant doubters to faith and life. It continues to have that wonderful affect on people even today. And yet, instead of clinging to God’s word; instead of reading, studying and digesting that word as we are encouraged to do, we tend to set it aside or take it for granted. There is a story of a pastor visiting a family in his congregation, and in order to impress the pastor, the father said to his son, Go and get the book we all know

and love. Imagine the father's embarrassment when the boy returned with a *Harry Potter* book. And yet how many people are there who are more familiar with Harry Potter or any other book or magazine than they are with the Bible? I am not suggesting that the bible is the only book that we can read. But surely it should be more than just a table ornament in our homes or a place to store souvenirs. Listen again to what John says: ***“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”***

Sadly, there are many in our day and age who seek to disprove that the bible is divine truth. There are those who prefer to see it as just one example of man-made sacred writings, like the Koran. There are those who think of it as just another book, a product of its time which is too dated and too stilted for today's world. There are many more who simply refuse to listen to it at all. They prefer to put their hope and trust in human wisdom. It is what they feel that matters. That is true for many who consider themselves Christians, too. We don't look to the Word of God, but to ourselves. That is why it is so easy for people to seek other sources of inspiration and knowledge. Every time I go into a bookstore, I stop to look at the religion section. And every time I do so, I am amazed to see how small a section is set aside for Christian books, especially when the section of New Age books is so large. Instead of clinging to the only book that is absolutely true, people seem to be more interested in myths and fantasy. And in chasing after myths and following human wisdom, they have given up the blessings that God does give us in His word.

What about us? Do we read the words of Scripture, hear them and take them to heart? Paul reminds us that ***“All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”*** (2 Timothy 3:16–17, ESV) He also tells us that these words make us wise unto salvation. There is no denying that the bible is not the sort of book you sit down and read like a novel. We do have bible reading plans, and I would encourage you to use one of these to read your Bible every day. Yes, there are those parts which are difficult to read and even more difficult to understand. And yet, there is a life and excitement that comes through these words, especially when we see again and again in the simple, clear words of Scripture the great love of God, who tells us how He gave His own son to die for us on the cross and rise to give us life. Dr. Rieu a distinguished British scholar, was well known for his translations of the works of Homer into English. The publisher of the Penguin Classics asked him to try his hand at translating the gospels. At the age of 60, having been a life-long agnostic, Rieu agreed to try it. At that time, his son said, “it will be interesting to see what father makes of the four gospels. It will be even more interesting to see what the four gospels make of father.” Within a year, Dr. Rieu was converted to Christianity. He noted, *“I got the deepest feeling that the whole material was extraordinarily alive. My work changed me. I came to the conclusion that these words bear the seal of the Son of Man and God.”*

Rieu's experience is not unique. It is something that is repeated again and again when people get into God's word. What John tells us in our text is that God's word will be a blessing to us the more we read it, hear it, and take it to heart—and how we need this wonderful good news! In our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah asks the question: ***“Behold, you were angry, and we sinned; in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?”*** (Isaiah 64:5, ESV) Isaiah knew the answer through the Holy Spirit. It is an answer that resounds loud and clear in the pages of Holy Scripture. That answer is made known as Christ comes to answer the cries of the people in our Gospel lesson, as they shout ***“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David! Hosanna in the highest!”*** (Mark 11:10, ESV) It is the answer that Paul points to as he tells us in our epistle lesson: ***“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,”*** (1 Corinthians 1:4–7, ESV) That knowledge is found in God's Word. Guided by the Word we see our sin and need for a saviour, but we also see that Jesus Christ came to die and rise for us. It was for us and for our forgiveness and salvation that He left heaven's glory to be born in that lowly manger. It is for us that He suffered the death of the cross. It is for us that He rose to conquer death and the grave. Jesus told the Pharisees: ***“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me,”*** (John 5:39, ESV) They didn't listen, but how blessed are those who hear that Word, believe it and rejoice in it.

Another church year has begun. With it, we look forward to celebrating our Lord's coming so long ago. Advent also calls us to watch and be ready in these days, for Christ is coming again to bring this world to an end and to take His people into eternal glory. God's Word helps us to be watchful and ready. Until that day, may we be guided, encouraged, and comforted by God's Word. May this, indeed, be our year of the bible, for we know that ***“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”*** Amen.