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### Prepare for Paradise

Advent has been a season of preparation – those 4 weeks which help us prepare for Christmas – the celebration of Christ’s coming to earth by way of his birth. We have prepared for our celebration of Christmas. Beautiful decorations. Just the right tree. Sentimental ornaments. Wrapped presents. Delicious meals, cookies, and treats. But soon the goodies will be consumed, if they haven’t been already, the decorations will be put away for another year, but our preparations will continue. We have something more important to prepare for. Christmas is not a standalone event, because it also points us to our ultimate future and reality. We need to prepare for Paradise.

One of these years we will get Advent right. Advent is not only a season to prepare us to celebrate the first Advent of Jesus. It is also a season to prepare us for his second Advent, not again through the birth canal, but through the parted heavens.

Even as birth pangs precede and accompany the birth of a child, so also the signs of the times teach us that Jesus’ return is near. Just as we can’t be sure when a baby will be born, unless it is induced, we can’t be sure when Jesus will come. Even as angels announced the birth of Jesus, so also, they will herald his return.

Advent is to be a time of preparing for celebrating Jesus' first coming and his second. One of these years we will get Advent right. One of these years, the babe of Bethlehem will come as the reigning King to take his believers with him into his eternal kingdom. Even as we prepare for Christmas, we need to be prepared for Paradise. We did not have the privilege to witness his first advent, but we will witness his second.

Unfortunately, some activities, that are normally associated with this time of year, may, in fact, deter us and distract us from preparing for Jesus' return. Rampant materialism, distractions, sugar comas, or frantic busy-ness, do little to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus when he comes in his glory. Jesus wants to prepare us for Paradise.

The baby Jesus, grew up, lived a perfect life, so that he could lay it down as the perfect sacrifice for sin. Your sin. My sin. We have a bigger problem than COVID. Sin. While on the cross, Jesus assured the repentant thief, even as he assures all who trust in him, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." Paradise, in this case, refers to the intermediate state as souls await the resurrection. But Paradise, in the Bible, also refers to the final and eternal state following Jesus' return and the resurrection of the dead.

It happens all the time, when someone dies, the grieving family speaks of their loved one going to a better place. I'm not always so sure that they know that

we go to heaven because Jesus died, not because we die. Because Jesus rose, we will rise.

Jesus conquered death by his resurrection, and he ascended to heaven to, as he says, prepare a place for us. He promises that all who believe in him, who have received him, will enter into eternity to live in God's presence and blessing.

At Christ's return, we will be given new bodies. We may not particularly like the current bodies that we have been given. We don't like our hair, (or lack of it) height, or eye color. Our bodies suffer from injury and illness. Over time, our bodies begin to betray us. We can feel trapped in them and long for liberation. While that certainly comes in death, Jesus did not take on flesh, die in the flesh, rise in the flesh, and soon will return in the flesh, so that we would go through eternity as disembodied souls. Jesus came in the flesh to redeem our flesh along with our souls.

As John 1 says, "The Word became flesh." Jesus, the Word of God, the expression of God, took on human flesh in his mother's womb. God came to us in way that we could understand. Jesus came to earth so that we can go to heaven. He was born so that we could be born again. He took on a human body so that we would gain an immortal body. His flesh was torn, so that our flesh would be healed. He went from the womb of his mother to the tomb of the garden. From

the swaddling cloths in a manger to the linen shrouds of death. He lived a short life of 33 years, or so, so that we could have life, forever. True life. Abundant life.

Jesus taking on flesh points us to the time when we will take on new flesh at the resurrection of the dead at his return. This day we celebrate the fact, that the Baby Jesus came to dwell with us here on earth, so that we will one day dwell with him in Paradise.