Our texts for this morning signal a turn in the church calendar. We are now heading straight for the beginning of a new church year, which begins in Advent. Advent is when we look forward to Christ’s second coming, his coming again in glory. Advent is when we look forward to Christ coming not in lowliness and humility as in the stable, but as an all-glorious King. In Advent we look for the coming of a King who is worth hoping and yearning for, one who will not disappoint. Advent looks to the end of human history, and calls the church to prepare for that end now, now, while it is still day. In the northern hemisphere at least, this is also signaled by the shortening of days. The days are growing shorter, so too is the day of this life growing shorter and shorter. Christ’s second coming is closer now then when we awoke this morning. The church year begins by looking to this end, the end of the ages, the end of all things.

This decisive turn toward Advent is seen most clearly in our Epistle lesson. Hebrews says, “Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time” (9:28). From now until Christ the King, which is the last Sunday of the Christian year, our readings will get increasingly apocalyptic, looking toward the coming judgment and what our collect for today calls the “day of wrath.” Christ will appear a second time; as we say in the liturgy of the Table, “Christ will come again.” And this time his purpose is different from the first. The passage I just read from Hebrews continues: “[Christ] will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (9:28). Jesus comes not to deal with sin, for he has already dealt fully and finally with sin. For on the cross, sin was defeated, it was put to death in his own body; it was, as he said, finished. In the second coming, He comes “not to deal with sin,” He comes to save, to save those who wait for him.

In the tradition that I grew up in, it was not an uncommon question to ask one another, “when were you saved?” By this we always meant, when did you come to pray a prayer asking to be saved? Now this is not altogether wrong, and I don’t at all mean to disparage such questions or the ones who ask them. But I do wonder whether or not such a question speaks the way scripture speaks.
Mark 16 says that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. So it is right and true for us to say that we were saved in the waters of holy Baptism and when we believed. But our passage says that Jesus comes “a second time ... to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” We who wait, wait to be saved. The conclusion that we must draw from this is that we are not yet saved, at least not yet fully and finally saved. Our salvation is something to be waited for. As Saint Paul says in Romans 13, “our salvation is now nearer to us than when we first believed.” So it is true that we were saved when we first believed and were baptized. But it is also true that we yet wait to be saved.

Now none of this should lead us to question our salvation, that is not what the Hebrews passage means. This passage should not cause us to turn in on ourselves, and try to figure out whether or not we are saved. Quite to the contrary, this brings us to look away from ourselves altogether, and look to the one that we are waiting for. When this one comes, he comes bringing our salvation, he comes as our salvation.

But for we who have believed and have been baptized, this text from Hebrews should nevertheless cause us to pause, and wonder and marvel at what is this salvation that we have received and yet await. How can it be that we are already saved, and yet we await being saved? These two things seem to be incompatible with one another, but Scripture affirms them both. How can they both be true?

A short answer to this, is that we are always living in the season of Advent. Karl Barth, a famous and influential twentieth-century theologian, once said, “What other time or season can or will the Church ever have but that of Advent?”¹ When I first came into a church that followed the Christian year, I thought that Advent was the season when we were preparing for Christmas, as if every year we were supposed to pretend that we had forgotten that Jesus Christ had already been born. That’s not quite it. Advent is the season when we recognize that we always stand in the place of Israel waiting for her Messiah. As Israel waited, so we await the Messiah to come, to come again. Christ’s first Advent is our assurance that he will come again, that we are not waiting for Godot, we will not wait forever.

But how is it that we are to wait for this coming King? All of our readings in Advent will unveil this life of waiting, so I need not anticipate what they will have to say now. But this morning, the Spirit of God gives us two images for this waiting: the two widows, one from the Old Testament lesson and the other from the Gospel lesson.

¹ Church Dogmatics IV/3.1, 322.
In our Old Testament lesson, the context is that of a great drought and famine in Israel and in the surrounding lands. This drought is no mere accident of natural forces; it is God’s own doing. God himself has hurled this great calamity upon his own people. He has done this because of Israel’s unfaithfulness and sin. As a further sign of judgment against Israel, the Word of the Lord comes to Elijah and sends him, not to any of the many widows in Israel, but to a Gentile widow, who lives outside of Israel.

When Elijah meets this woman, in the midst of a severe drought, he has the audacity to ask for water. Without hesitation, the woman goes to get it. While she is on her way, Elijah then asks for some bread. Her response is heart-wrenching. “As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of meal [grain] in a jar, and a little oil in a cruse; and now, I am gathering a couple sticks, that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it, and die” (1 Kings 17:12). You can hear the desperation in her voice. Death is at her doorstep, her grain and her oil are just about to run out. She is powerless to change her situation, she has but the grim reality before her of one final loaf of bread, and then death. Like the Gentiles separated from the promises of Israel, she has no reason for hope, no prospects for salvation. She had nothing to wait for, but death.

But precisely in this situation of hopelessness, the Word of the Lord comes to her through the mouth of Elijah and gives hope: “Fear not, ... ” Says Elijah, “For the Lord says, ‘The [grain] shall not be spent, and ... the oil shall not fail.’” She had nothing to do but to wait for death, but the Word of the Lord breaks into this situation and gives the hope of life. The Word of the Lord comes to her on the lips of Elijah, and hope is created in her as if out of nothing. She no longer waits for death, she now waits for life.

Like this widow, the Word of the Lord is saying to us, Fear not, your grain shall not be spent, and your oil shall not fail. The Word of promise came to this widow and saved her, but also promised a future salvation. The promise was that she shall be sustained until the rains come again and the drought and famine are no more. So too are we given a promise of salvation when the Word of the Lord comes to us, first in our Baptisms and every time we gather around this table and hear the Gospel of the Lord preached. We are saved and at the same time called to wait for a future salvation, when weeping shall be no more and we are delivered from the very presence and temptation and even the very possibility of sin.

While the Church waits for our own Elijah to come, no matter how dire her situation may be, no matter how little grain or oil there might be, no matter how many empty pews there are or how many churches close their doors, precisely in this dire situation the Word comes to us and promises that the
Bread of Life shall never be spent and the Spirit of God shall not fail. The Word comes to us, and creates the possibility of waiting in faith, waiting for our salvation to arise like the morning sun.

While we wait for our King to return, the life of the future starts working its way into our fellowship even now. In this future life, poverty is no hindrance to God’s purposes. In our Gospel lesson, the Spirit of God gives us our second image for the life of waiting. Jesus points to the widow who gives but two copper pennies and says that she truly gave more than those who put in much. Now I don’t think that Jesus actually intends to criticize those who were wealthy and had given out of their wealth. Rather, Jesus is drawing attention to the poor widow in order to greatly praise her. For, in the hands of this coming King, in the hands of Christ Jesus, even two copper pennies put into the church’s offering box begin to lay the foundation for the golden streets of the New Jerusalem.

For the New Jerusalem, the coming Kingdom of God, has its own economy. No matter how poor we might be, no matter how little we might have to give, the Lord counts it of great value when we entrust ourselves to him in the way that we give. This means that no matter how little we have, we can give abundantly to the Lord. Should we have but two pennies to our name, we can give abundantly, we can yet give “our selves, our time and our possessions,” trusting that they are signs of God’s love for us. And whenever we give, it also becomes a sign that we do not place our trust in anything in this world to save us. We can give trusting that Christ alone is our salvation, and he is coming again to save those who wait for him. For Christ shall surely come for us, the same one,

Who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.