One of my favorite lines from a Bugs Bunny cartoon is when a tyrannical king is complaining about his lot in life by saying, “Every day the same thing – variety.” Outside of always wanting to put that line in one of my sermons, I think it is a good reminder for us as we are very close to Christmas Day. We humans complain a lot, very little is ever right. I was recently reading a book where the author was lamenting how he had missed the golden times of the hunter-gatherer. The poor dear was so put out by having been born in an age of indoor plumbing, Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, clean safe drinking water and medical care that does not involve leaches – give him a loincloth, a spear and a lifespan of 32 years (that is if he doesn’t first get mauled to death by a rhinoceros) and then his life will be good. It seems that no matter how much we have it is never enough, or never the right type for us to be truly happy. I read about a study, which looked at people who had won the lottery and they found something very interesting. Six months after a person had won the lottery they were less happy than the day before they won the lottery. What all of this tells me is that when we try to predict what it is that is going to make us happy we are usually wrong. I doubt my hunter-gatherer friend would really be happy as a Kalahari bushman chasing an antelope for five hours in 105 degree heat. My guess is he would soon find antelope meat too gamey and the sand a little hot on his tootsies. And so as we are in our final days of preparation the message that I want to convey is let’s be happy with and grateful for what we get on Christmas Day and I mean this on multiple levels. There is the obvious part of this statement, at least secularly speaking, what we get are the presents under the tree or what’s in our stocking and so on. We should be grateful for all of those who took time to pick out a present for us. And further we should expand this gratitude beyond the immediate and obvious. We can be thankful for our loved ones, for our homes, for the Packers making the playoffs and whatever else in our lives that are truly blessings. But since we are in Church let me give you what it is for which we should be most grateful and why.

This Sunday in many ways is like the person who can’t keep secret what they have bought you for Christmas and so blurt it out. Today our readings pretty much give away the whole thing. In Isaiah we hear the prophet say, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.” In Matthew’s Gospel and Angel of the Lord appears to Joseph and says, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” So there it is, that is what the Church is getting you for Christmas – the Son of God. And if that’s not enough for you, I’m not sure that I can be of much help.

I once heard Peter Robinson of the Hoover Institute say that there are three big questions we need to answer in life which are: where did we come from, where are we going and why do we feel guilty. You may argue that there are more, like why do people pay attention to the Kardashians, does anyone really like the song *Last Christmas I gave you my Heart*, and who put the ram in the rama lama ding dong? But for the moment let’s just stick with these three. If those are really the big three questions all three of those are answered in the coming of Jesus Christ.

Where did we come from, well let’s look to John’s Gospel. It says, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Okay on to the next step where are we going? For that let’s take a look again at the Gospel of John where Jesus says, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also.” And now to the last one, why do we feel guilty. Well we kind of already know that answer which is because of sin. We have fallen short and miss the mark and there is nothing in us that can save us from that. Our guilt is the reflection of knowing that our own actions have condemned us. So technically Jesus does not answer that question, but the question he does answer is how can we do something about that guilt. And that question is answered right in today’s Gospel reading from Matthew where we hear, “he will save his people from their sins.” There we go, the hopelessness or guilt or whatever you want to call that is part and parcel of our sinfulness will be taken care of in Jesus. For Jesus bridges the void that keeps us from being reconciled with God.

There has been an interesting and sort of disturbing trend that has been going on in our modern society. That trend is that as peace and prosperity have increased people have not necessarily started feeling better about things. That is the less we have had to worry about death in childbirth, smallpox and so on this has not corresponded with us being less anxious and more grateful. One very troubling statistic that highlights this has happened in the past three years. That is in the past three years the average life expectancy of Americans has declined – not by a lot but it’s the first time since World War I and the influenza epidemic that the trend has gone down rather than up. And while the causes for things like this are complicated there are three things that have contributed significantly to this trend. Those three items are a rise in drug overdoses, an increase in liver disease and a rise in suicide rates. What all of these facts tell me is that people are looking for a way out of the hopelessness that they feel and are not looking to the one person that can actually do something about it. Jesus comes on Christmas day so that we do not have to live as ones without hope. He comes so that we do not have to try and seek respite from our guilt and shame in places that can do nothing about them. We do not need to turn to opioids or pine for the time of the hunter-gatherer, but rather we can rejoice in the coming of the Messiah who is Christ the Lord. If today’s reading were put up on the interweb they would need to have a spoiler alert because they give away the plot twist. The twist is that hopelessness has been cast into the outer darkness. But we have to be ready to receive this gift. We need a thankful heart, we need to stop looking for the next item that is going to fix everything, because that thing has already come and will come again in the person of Jesus Christ. And so here on Advent IV we should be about finished with our preparation so that on Christmas Day we are truly ready with open and thankful hearts to welcome Christ the newborn king. And so Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ this day and forevermore.