

A New Beginning

In the name of the Lord our Righteousness, dear friends in Christ: As I stated before the service began, today, the first Sunday in Advent, marks the beginning of a new church year. And as we make this new beginning, we see that the church year starts at pretty much the same place the last one ended: with the people of God watching and waiting in expectation for the coming of the Lord Jesus – though last week we focused on his second coming in glory, and this week as Advent begins, we make the mental shift to preparing for his humbler first coming at his nativity.

It's really rather ingenious the way the whole thing is set up. The organization of the church calendar provides a framework that guides us in the review the major events of God's plan of salvation each year. In Advent we take a spiritual pilgrimage to the time before our Lord's coming. We join the Old Testament saints in preparing ourselves for his arrival. At Christmas we celebrate the fulfillment of that long promised coming, when the Eternal Word became our brother in flesh to redeem us. Then in the Epiphany season that follows, we review the early ministry of Jesus. We see how the light of his teaching begins to shine in the darkness in ever expanding circles to Jews, to Gentiles, and beyond. In his healing miracles we see how he has come to set the captives free. Then comes the season of Lent when we retrace the Lord's steady march to Jerusalem where he fulfills his mission to redeem us by offering himself as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. Lent comes to its climax in Passion Week that begins with the triumphal entry on Palm Sunday (we heard a little about that this morning) and closes with Jesus' Good Friday death and burial, and his Sabbath rest in the tomb on Holy Saturday. The joyous season of Easter breaks forth at sunrise the very next day as we celebrate the Lord's resurrection. For the forty days that follow we join the disciples in walking with the risen Savior as he opens our minds to understand all things written about him in the Scriptures. This lasts until his departure at Ascension when he rises into heaven to assume his place at his Father's right hand. Ten days later we remember the coming of the Holy Spirit when he was poured upon the early church at Pentecost. Then throughout the long Pentecost season we concentrate on continuing to grow in Christian faith and life. The church year comes to its conclusion with the so-called last Sundays on which we turn our attention to our Lord's promise to return to us in glory, raise the dead, judge the world, and create a new heaven and new earth as an eternal inheritance for those who in this life trusted in him.

And somewhere between last Sunday and this, we completed one full cycle and now have come right back where we started a year ago. But then again, we're not exactly where we started, are we? No, a lot has happened to us in this last year. Though we are in one sense starting over, the truth is that we've made progress along the way. We've added experiences both good and bad. We've had our ups and downs, our gains and losses. Even more importantly for our spiritual formation, each week when we've met here the Lord has come to us through his Word and Sacraments, and through them he's been working on us, changing us, and causing us to mature in Christian faith and life. The upshot is that we are not the same people we were a year ago. Nor are we the same group of people. Some who were with us have moved on in one way or another, and others have been brought near to join us. And even those who have been here the whole time have been spiritually growing and changing in different ways and at different rates. So rather than thinking of today as the start of a cycle that simply repeats itself over and over again, it may be more accurate to describe it as the turning of a screw or an auger. As we turn through the cycle we cover a lot of ground, but at the same time we are making forward progress. And the purpose of this progress is to prepare ourselves more and more for the final goal: the coming of the Lord. Our intent is that we be as spiritually mature as possible so that we will be ready to meet him when he comes.

And that's what makes a day like this so important. The beginning of a new cycle is the perfect time to take stock of where you are and how you're doing. It's a good time for some serious introspection and evaluation – time to do a personal (perhaps even painful) assessment of what needs to be improved in your life. Now, when doing such a spiritual self-diagnosis, the temptation may be to look back at how far you've come in your walk of faith; but that would be a big mistake. Jesus said that those who put their hand to the

plow and look back to see how much of the job they've already done are not worthy of his kingdom. The question for the Christian is never "How far have I come?" or "How much have I accomplished?" It's always, "How much farther do I have to go?" and "How much more should be done?" Keeping our focus on how far we fall short of the goal of being what Christ would have us be keeps us from the sinful temptations to slow down and rest on our laurels or to take pride in our accomplishments. If the goal is what our Lord desires for us to be – and indeed what he has sent his Spirit to empower us to be – if *that's* the standard, not one of us is even close. That's why we need to keep looking ahead and making that our target.

So, what specifically should we be working on? We find the answer in today's Epistle lesson, which is a portion of Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica. And perhaps a little background here will be helpful. During his second mission journey, Paul and his companions, guided by the Holy Spirit, found themselves much farther from home than they had ever planned to be when they set out. They never expected to be in Greece; but that's where the Lord led them. And there they were spreading the good news of the Gospel with great success. As always, they faced opposition too. When they came to Thessalonica, they followed their usual practice of going to the local synagogue first and proclaiming Christ to the Jews who met for worship there. That made sense since it was the Jews who knew the One True God, and the Scriptures, and who were expecting the Savior to come. All the missionaries had to do was fill in the holes by explaining that Jesus of Nazareth was the Savior they were waiting for.

What happened when Paul taught about Jesus at the synagogue in Thessalonica was what usually happened: some of the Jews believed, some didn't, and some weren't quite sure what to think. But in addition to the Jews in this synagogue, there were a number of Gentiles who regularly worshipped with them; and they, for the most part, were more receptive to the Gospel – so receptive, in fact, that they shared their new faith in Jesus with their Pagan friends and neighbors. Before long the total number of Christians was more than the number of Jews in the original congregation – and this made the Jews who didn't believe in Jesus very angry and jealous. So angry and jealous that they started a riot and stormed the house where Paul and his companions were staying. Not finding them there, they grabbed the poor fellow who owned the place, a guy named Jason, and they roughed him up and dragged him before the city magistrates complaining about how he was sheltering notorious troublemakers in his home. Jason was arrested and forced to pay a lot of money to bail himself out of jail.

Realizing that their presence in Thessalonica would continue to be the cause for the congregation to come under attack by their enemies, Paul and his companions decided it would be best to leave immediately. They had experienced persecution themselves many times over and were willing to face it again; but this time it was different. The enemies of the church were placing the pressure on the new believers. Paul was concerned that these comparative babes in the faith wouldn't be able to stand up to the opposition. If he left now he hoped things would cool off enough for them to put down some deeper roots. The problem was that the missionaries hadn't spent much time there – only a few weeks. It wasn't nearly enough time for them to really ground this new group of Christians in the fundamentals of the faith. The result was that the church in Thessalonica was sort of half-baked Christian congregation. They had a smattering of the basics, but they were missing certain key points of instruction. And that, of course, made them especially susceptible to faltering or being led astray.

That's why Paul, writing from Corinth several months later, tells them how eager he is to meet with them again face to face. With genuine pastoral concern, he says he's been praying night and day for an opportunity to return and finish what he started among them. It's in this context that he mentions three specific areas in which he wants to bring them to a higher level of maturity. First, he says, we want to supply what is lacking in your faith. Second, we want your love for one another to increase and abound. And third and finally, we want your hearts to be firmly established in blamelessness and holiness so that you will be ready to receive the Lord Jesus when he comes again with all his saints.

Now, without claiming any prophetic gift or insight for myself, I can say with absolute certainty that if Paul were writing to this congregation of half-baked Christians (at least I don't think anyone here is claiming to be done yet) he would tell us exactly the same three things. And so, as we make this new Advent beginning together, it's to these three areas that we should look when doing our own self-evaluations. With this in mind, let's take it from the top. Ask yourself, "Where do I stand now ..."

“...with respect to my Christian faith?” Paul starts here because everything in the Christian life, salvation, good works, eternal life, spiritual gifts, our love for one another, prayer ... absolutely *everything* about being a Christian grows out of your faith in Jesus. If it's not of faith, then it isn't Christian. That's why we always need to work first and foremost on building ourselves up in the holy faith. So, where do you stand? What's lacking in your faith? That can be a tough question to answer. I mean, how do you know what you don't know? Maybe that's the wrong way to look at it anyway. Perhaps better questions to ask yourself are these: “Am I satisfied with knowing just the basics?” “Is instruction for confirmation something I did longer ago than I can remember and that I've forgotten most of anyway?” “Do I shy away from learning or hearing anything new?” “Do I resist digging deeper into the Word of God?” “Do I think that studying the finer points of Christian doctrine rates right up there with having a root canal?” “Do I think of our collective worship or the Lord's Supper as a take-it-or-leave-it sort of thing; I'm not too concerned if I miss it.” A “yes” to any or all of these questions is indicative of an extremely immature and unfinished faith.

A more mature and complete faith, by contrast, is keenly aware of how fragile and incomplete it is. It's impressed by how much it doesn't know. It's aware of how weak and wavering it is. For these reasons it seeks to grow stronger, deeper, and more complete by taking every opportunity to draw closer to Christ through his Word and Sacraments. It's like the man who said to Jesus, “Lord, I believe. I need you to help me overcome my unbelief.” A mature faith understands that faith comes by hearing the Word, and so it seeks to immerse itself completely in it, always hungering and thirsting for more, always seeking to know more of Christ and the power of his death and resurrection.

But again, such a mature faith understands that Christianity isn't just about piling up facts about Jesus in the head or the heart. It understands that true faith is lived out in acts of love. So, the next question to ask yourself is, “Where do I stand with respect to my love for others?” Am I angry with certain people? Am I holding a grudge against someone? Am I being unforgiving? Uncaring? Are there certain people that I am going out of my way to avoid? Am I being judgmental – all too willing to see their faults but not my own? Is there someone out there for whom I have no time or patience? Someone who I wish would just shut up and go away? We could bring it closer to home: ask yourself, “How am I showing my love for my own family?” Am I being the husband or wife I should be for my spouse? Am I raising my children as I ought? Am I contributing my time, talents, and treasures to the church and community as I should?

Just guessing, but I'm willing to bet there's no one here who feels comfortable with this line of questioning. Good. But now that you've put a face on it – perhaps several faces – join me in repenting of past mistakes and failures; and receiving the Lord's forgiveness and his power to amend your life, in committing yourself to being more manifestly loving to the people you now have in mind. Resolve now to do whatever lies within your reach to serve them, to forgive them, and to reconcile conflicts and build bridges to those who have not been receiving your love as fully or completely as Christ calls you to do. And no, it probably won't all happen overnight; but let it not be that when the next new cycle of the church year begins and I ask the same questions, that you're still thinking of exactly the same people.

And finally, as we complete Paul's checklist, ask yourself, “How am I doing with respect to blamelessness and holiness?” These are kind of hard to put a finger on, perhaps; but if we were to draw a distinction, blamelessness has to do with how others perceive you in a moral sense, and holiness has to do with the inner attitude and thoughts of your heart. For the former, Christians understand that they represent Jesus Christ to the world. What they know of him is what they see in us. As such, we want to cultivate in our lives Christ-like virtues like honesty, integrity, selflessness, hard work, a willingness to lend a hand, endurance, patience, good family values, sexual purity, and so on. Are those the things that people see in you? Are those the words they would use to describe you? If not, then you've got your work cut out for you; and even if they are, surely you recognize there's room for improvement. Through repentance and the power of the Spirit let's resolve today to do that. And when it comes to personal holiness, the question is, “Who you are when no one is watching?” Where do you allow your sinful thoughts and fantasies to take you? How's your prayer and private devotional life? What are your innermost doubts and fears? What resentments do you hold against God for the way things have turned out in your life? I'll bet we all have some house cleaning to do in this regard too.

And so, let's do that. As we begin a new year together in the church of Christ, and as we prepare to receive our King who comes to us in his body and blood for the forgiveness of our many sins, let's commit – each one of us – to making a new beginning in ourselves in faith, in love for one another, and in blamelessness and holiness of life so that we too will be ready to receive the Lord Jesus when he comes in the fullness of his glory with all the saints. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!