
A NEW BEGINNING**Sermon for the 1st Sunday in Advent, 2021****1 Thessalonians 3:9-13**

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13: ⁹ **For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy that we have in the presence of our God because of you?** ¹⁰ **We are most earnestly praying day and night that we may see your faces and supply what is lacking in your faith.** ¹¹ **May our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you!** ¹² **May the Lord make you grow in love and overflow with it for one another and for all people, just as we do to you,** ¹³ **that He may strengthen your hearts to be blameless and holy before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy ones! Amen.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The first Sunday in Advent marks the beginning of a new church year. As we make this new beginning, we see that it 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. While the church year ends with us focused on His second coming in glory, the first week of Advent begins with us making the mental shift to prepare for our Lord's more humble first coming.

Throughout the year, we read and learn of the wonderful deeds of our Saviour. We hear of His life – His birth, death, resurrection, ascension and so forth, and also of His teaching and works of mercy in healing the sick and raising the dead. Now we have completed one entire cycle and have come right back to where we started a year ago. But it is not the same as when we started. 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 in church, our Lord has come to us through His Word and Sacraments. Through them, He's been working on us, changing us, causing us to mature in Christian faith and life. The upshot is that we are not the same people we were a year ago. This past year we 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 in the words of Paul is that Jesus **“may strengthen your hearts to be blameless and holy before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy ones!”** Jesus is coming again, so our intent is that we are as spiritually mature as possible so that when He does come, we shall be ready to meet Him.

This is what makes a day like this so important. The beginning of a new cycle is the perfect time to take stock of where we are and how we'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 our lives.

When we run a spiritual self-diagnosis on ourselves, the temptation may be to look back at how far we've come in our walk of faith; but that would be a big mistake. Jesus once said that *“No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God”* (Luke 9:62). The question 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 precisely should we be working on? We find our answer in Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians.

During his second missionary journey, when Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica, they had followed their usual practice of going to the local synagogue first and proclaiming Christ to the Jews who had 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 Saviour to come. All the missionaries had to do was fill in the holes by explaining that Jesus of Nazareth was the Saviour 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 unbelieving friends and neighbours. 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. In fact, so angry that Paul and his companions had to flee. Now the church's enemies were placing the pressure on the new believers, and Paul was concerned that these comparative babes in the faith wouldn't be able to stand up to the opposition. They had a smattering of the basics, but they were missing certain key points of instruction which made them especially susceptible to faltering or being led astray.

That's why Paul, writing from Corinth several months later, told them how eager he was to meet with them again face to face. He prayed, **“May our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you!”** With genuine pastoral concern, he was praying for an opportunity to return and finish what he had started among them. It was in this context that Paul mentioned three specific areas in which he wanted to bring the Thessalonians to a higher level of maturity. First, he prayed, **“that we may see your faces and supply what is lacking in your faith.”** Second, that they may **“grow in love and overflow with it for one another and for all people,”** and third, that the Lord **“may strengthen your hearts to be blameless and holy before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy ones!”** If Paul were writing to our congregation, he would tell us precisely the same three things.

So it is that as we make this new Advent beginning together, it's to these three areas that we should look, when doing our self-evaluations. With this in mind, let's take it from the top.

Ask yourselves, *“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 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. Where do we stand? What is lacking in our faith? That can be a tricky question to answer, and maybe that's the wrong way to look at it. Perhaps better questions to ask ourselves 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 tooth pulled?”* *“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, *“I believe. Help my unbelief!”* (Mark 9:24). A mature faith understands that faith comes by hearing the Word¹. So it seeks to immerse itself

¹ Romans 10:17

completely in it, always hungering and thirsting for more, always striving 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*. No, it understands that **true faith is lived out in acts of love**. So, the next question to ask 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 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?

I'm sure no one here feels comfortable with this line of questioning. Therefore we repent of past mistakes and failures; and receive the Lord's forgiveness. We trust Him to amend our lives and to commit ourselves to be more manifestly loving to the people we now have in mind. We resolve now to do whatever lies within our reach to serve them, to forgive them, and to reconcile conflicts and build bridges to those who have not been receiving our love as fully or completely as Christ calls us 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 in 12 months, you do not find yourselves still thinking of exactly the same people.

Finally, as we complete Paul's checklist, we ask ourselves, “*How am I doing with respect to blamelessness and holiness?*” These are kind of hard to put the 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 us? Are those the words they would use to describe you? If not, then we have our work cut out; and even if they are, surely we must recognise that there is 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 we allow our sinful thoughts and fantasies to take us? How's our prayer and private devotional life? What are our innermost doubts and fears? What resentments do we hold against God for the way things have turned out in our lives? 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 with all His holy ones!**” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Almighty God and Father, we thank and praise You for Your promises of mercy and deliverance, which You have fulfilled in the coming of Your Son Jesus Christ. He is indeed the Light to reveal You to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.

As Your faithful people in every age have believed Your Word, grant that we, too, may believe it, and one day inherit Your heavenly promises. As Your people of old looked forward with longing to the coming of the Messiah, grant that we, too, may joyfully welcome Jesus into our hearts, and be saved by Him from the power of sin, Satan, and death.

Lead us by Your Spirit to a deep awareness of our need of repentance. Teach us to hate what is evil and to love what is good. Strengthen us when our enemies try to lead us into sin. Direct our lives in ways that are holy and right, that we may serve and glorify You in all things.

Cause Your saving light to shine in all corners of the earth, that people everywhere may know Your love in Christ Jesus, and join that great number of Your people who say: “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!”

Grant peace to the nations of the earth. Look with special favour on our own country, and on all its citizens. Guide all who rule over us, that they may learn to know You as the only true God, and may seek to do Your will in all things.

Bless all who have gathered in Your house today to hear Your precious Word. Grant strength, comfort, and understanding to those who are sick or troubled, to those who are sad and depressed, to those who are enduring hardships, and to all others who are in any bodily or spiritual need. Grant them perseverance, and the joy of Your abiding presence.

We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, who has come to deliver us, who has died to save us, and risen to justify us, and who is always alive to intercede for us. Amen.

FIRST SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Jeremiah 33:14-16

¹⁴ “Look! The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I shall fulfil the gracious promise that I have made to the family of Israel and to the family of Judah. ¹⁵ In those days and at that time I shall cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and He will put justice and righteousness into effect in the land. ¹⁶ In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which the city will be called: ‘The LORD Is Our Righteousness.’”

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

⁹ For what thanks can we render to God for you, for all the joy that we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰ We are most earnestly praying day and night that we may see your faces and supply what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹ May our God and Father Himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you! ¹² May the Lord make you grow in love and overflow with it for one another and for all people, just as we do to you, ¹³ that He may strengthen your hearts to be blameless and holy before our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all His holy ones! Amen.

Luke 19:28-40

²⁸ After Jesus had said this, He continued His way in front of them up to Jerusalem. ²⁹ When He came near Bethphage and Bethany at the Mount of Olives, as it was called, He sent two of His disciples. ³⁰ He said, “Go into the village ahead of you! As you enter, you will find a colt tied up on which no one has ever sat. Untie it and bring it! ³¹ If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ say, ‘The Lord needs it!’”

³² The men whom He had sent went and found it just as He had told them.

³³ While they were untying the colt, its owners asked them, “Why are you untying the colt?”

³⁴ They said, “Because the Lord needs it.”

³⁵ They brought the colt to Jesus, put their garments on the colt and seated Jesus on it. ³⁶ As He was riding along, people kept spreading their garments on the road.

³⁷ As He was already coming near the place where the road goes down the Mount

of Olives, the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully and loudly for all the miracles they had seen. ³⁸ They said: “**Blessed is the King who is coming in the name of the Lord!** In heaven peace, and glory in the highest heavens!”

³⁹ Some of the Pharisees in the crowd told Him, “Teacher, order Your disciples to be quiet!”

⁴⁰ He answered them, “I tell you, if these keep quiet, the stones will cry out.”

