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Sermon: “Give us Grace” (I Thessalonians 3:9-13)

November 29, 2009

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, the season of the church year during which we anticipate the celebration of the first advent, or coming of Christ at Christmas, as well as the Second Coming of Christ when He returns as He promised. Advent is a season of preparation. Often during Advent it is common to focus on things we can do to prepare for the coming of the Lord, as we see in our collect for today as we prayed “Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” This can lead us to scurry about manically trying to get our spiritual lives in order.

When I was in college I worked part-time as a cashier at a grocery store for awhile. Some shifts were very busy, while others were not. It was actually more stressful when it was not busy, because when it was not busy and the manager was coming toward us we had to look busy. We scurried about cleaning the register, straightening out the magazines and candy boxes in our check-out lanes, etc. in an effort to look busy out of fear of the manager. Sometimes we do this as Christians. I recently saw a sign that said, “Jesus is coming... look busy” ☺.

But the starting point of preparing for the advent of the Lord is not trying to look busy; it is grace. Again, the collect we prayed today begins, “Almighty God, give us grace...” The grace of God enables us to prepare for the coming of the Lord.

In today’s passage from Paul’s Letter to the Thessalonians we see that preparing for the coming of the Lord does not begin with what we should be doing for God, but with what God is doing for us. Paul, along with Silas and Timothy, founded the church at Thessalonica during Paul’s second missionary journey, as described in Acts 17:1-10. Many people were open to the gospel and responded to Paul’s preaching by putting their faith in Christ. Others were opposed to the gospel and responded by starting a riot that became so intense that Paul was forced out of Thessalonica. Timothy and Silas remained for awhile and then rejoined Paul in Corinth (Acts 18:5).

Paul’s First Letter to the Thessalonians is earliest of his thirteen letters of the New Testament, and one of the major themes of this letter is preparing for the coming of the Lord. This preparation does not begin with what we should be doing for God, but with what God is doing for us.

Today’s passage from I Thessalonians is a prayer in which Paul shows us three things God is doing for us related to preparing for the coming of the Lord. Listen to Paul’s prayer here:

“Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as

we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (3:11-13).

The first thing Paul prays is for God to direct the way for himself, along with Paul and Silas, to visit the Thessalonians again: “Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.” The phrase “direct our way” is translated in other English versions as “clear the way.” In other words, Paul is praying that God would clear the way, that God would remove the obstacles that were currently preventing their being together again.

Sometimes in our lives there are obstacles in our paths that prevent us from being with people with whom we long to be. Last week on the night before Thanksgiving I watched the classic 1987 comedy, *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*, with Steve Martin and John Candy. Steve Martin plays an extremely uptight executive named Neal Page who has wrapped up a business trip in New York and just wants to return home in Chicago for Thanksgiving. He ends up paired with John Candy, who plays Del Griffith, a shower curtain ring salesman also going to Chicago. The entire movie is about Neal and Del facing one obstacle after another in their attempt to get to Chicago. It’s a hilarious movie with a powerful ending; for when Neal is finally almost home, he returns to the L-station and finds Del alone because Del has no home, and Neal brings Dell to his home for Thanksgiving.

When it comes to our being reunited with our Creator, Jesus has cleared the way. He has removed the obstacle of our sin in His atoning death on the cross for the sins of the world, and offers us the gift of forgiveness and eternal life, as Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23).

Moreover, in His resurrection Jesus has removed the obstacle of death that prevents us from being reunited with those we love who have died. *The Book of Common Prayer* puts it this way, “By his death he has destroyed death, and by his rising to life again he has won for us everlasting life” (p. 379); and in his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul puts it this way: “In fact Christ has been raised from the dead... for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ... Death has been swallowed up in victory... Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:20, 22, 54, and 57). Preparing for the coming of the Lord begins with the fact that Jesus Christ has cleared the way for us to be reunited with Him and reunited with those who have died. Through His death and resurrection Jesus Christ has removed the obstacles of sin and death.

Jesus has cleared the way because He is the Way, as Jesus told His disciples the night before He died on the cross, “I am the way” (John 14:6); and as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, Jesus’ death on the cross has opened for us “the new and living way” (Hebrews 10:20).

The *second* thing Paul prays in today’s passage from I Thessalonians is “may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you.” The

Bible is not an account of our reaching out to God, but an account of God's reaching out to us. God takes the initiative and reaches out to us with love in Jesus Christ. It's sort of like a middle school or high school dance. One person takes the initiative and walks across the dance floor to someone else and invites the other to dance; the couple does not magically meet halfway. God does not meet us halfway; He takes the initiative and comes all the way to us and gives us His unconditional love in Jesus Christ.

And God does not call us to hoard that love for ourselves, but to respond by loving others. God is the One who makes us "increase and abound in love for one another." We also see this in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians: "I pray that you may have the power... to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (3:18-19). That's a great concept—"to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge"—I pray that you "get it" even though you cannot "get it" ☺. We cannot even begin to understand the vastness of God's love for us. God's love for us abounds and overflows. God's love for us is always more than enough. And the Holy Spirit enables us to respond to God's love by loving others, as Jesus said at the Last Supper, "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34).

And Paul prays here that God would make love "increase and abound" not just for one another in the church, but "for all," for those outside the church. I believe one of the reasons Christ Church is growing is because God is making His love here "increase and abound," because God's love here is overflowing. People tend to feel drawn to where they are loved and wanted, rather than unloved and tolerated.

Moreover, Paul, referring to himself, Silas, and Timothy, adds "just as we abound in love for you." One of the reasons the church in Thessalonica began in the first place was that the people there could sense the love of Paul, Silas, and Timothy for them. Love is contagious. Love begets love.

The *third* thing Paul prays in today's passage from I Thessalonians is "may he (the Lord) so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." Only God can make us blameless before Him.

I recently read *Rocket Men*, Craig Nelson's fascinating account of the phenomenal effort involved in getting Neil Armstrong of the Apollo 8 crew to be the first man on the moon on July 20, 1969. This was an incredibly complex engineering endeavor. Listen to what Jerry Lederer, who was the safety chief for the mission, said three days before liftoff: "Apollo 8 has 5,600,000 parts and one and one half million systems, subsystems, and assemblies. Even if all functioned with 99.9 percent reliability, we could expect 5,600 defects" (p. 194-195).

Often our lives are even more complex than Apollo 8, and our hearts, thoughts, relationships, and actions do not even remotely come close to 99.9% reliability. And yet God can strengthen our hearts in holiness because the One who is holy, Jesus Christ, has taken away the sin of the world in His death on the cross—as Paul wrote in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: "For our

sake he (God) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:21).

And when Paul prays in today’s passage that we may be blameless at Jesus’ Second Coming, he does not mean 99.9% blameless, but 100% blameless, and that is something only God can do. The good news of the gospel is that that is something God has done in the death and resurrection of Christ, and something God is doing right now by the sanctifying power of the Holy Spirit. God has atoned for our sins in the death of Jesus Christ, and by the power of the Holy Spirit God gives us the grace to “cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”

And it gets even better. When Jesus returns, He will not return alone, but with “all his saints.” Remember that in His death and resurrection Jesus Christ has cleared away the obstacles of sin and death that prevent us from being reunited with God and reunited with those we love who have died. Often the season of Advent, the holiday season, brings up waves of mourning and regret in us. We long to be reunited with those we love who have died and have them seated around our dining room table. We long to give them a hug again and make things right. When Jesus returns, we will be reunited once and for all with “all the saints,” and that gives us comfort and hope.

So on this first Sunday of Advent we can be encouraged and comforted, because preparing for the coming of the Lord does not begin with scurrying about trying to look busy for God; rather it begins with the grace of God. Preparing for the coming of the Lord does not begin with what we can do for God, but with what God has done for us. In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ God has removed the obstacles of sin and death, and cleared the way for us to be reunited with Him and with those we love who have died. God has taken the initiative and given us His unconditional love, and by the Holy Spirit He enables us to respond by increasing and abounding in love for others. And God has made it possible for us to be 100% blameless before Him at the Second Coming.

In the collect for the day we prayed, “Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.” In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit God does just that. God doesn’t leave us alone at the L-train station; He comes to the station and brings us home.

Let us pray...