

The First Sunday in Advent

November 28, 2021

P: In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

Scripture Readings

Jeremiah 33:14-16

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’”

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?

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, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

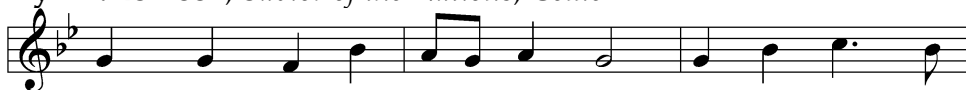
Luke 21:25-36

“And there will be signs in sun and moon and stars, and on the earth distress of nations in perplexity because of the roaring of the sea and the waves, people fainting with fear and with foreboding of what is coming on the world. For the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, straighten up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

And he told them a parable: “Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf, you see for yourselves and know that the summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all has taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

“But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Hymn: *LSB 332, Savior of the Nations, Come*



1 Sav - ior of the na - tions, come, Vir - gin's Son, make
2 Not by hu - man flesh and blood, By the Spir - it
3 Here a maid was found with child, Yet re - mained a
4 Then stepped forth the Lord of all From His pure and



here Your home! Mar - vel now, O heav'n and earth,
of our God, Was the Word of God made flesh—
vir - gin mild. In her womb this truth was shown:
king - ly hall; God of God, yet ful - ly man,



That the Lord chose such a birth.
Wom - an's off - spring, pure and fresh.
God was there up - on His throne.
His he - ro - ic course be - gan.

5 God the Father was His source,
Back to God He ran His course.
Into hell His road went down,
Back then to His throne and crown.

6 For You are the Father's Son
Who in flesh the vict'ry won.
By Your mighty pow'r make whole
All our ills of flesh and soul.

7 From the manger newborn light
Shines in glory through the night.
Darkness there no more resides;
In this light faith now abides.

△ 8 Glory to the Father sing,
Glory to the Son, our king,
Glory to the Spirit be
Now and through eternity.

Sermon

Long distance relationships are tough. Some of you probably know that first-hand, whether one of you was off at school somewhere else, or deployed with the military, or whatever the circumstances might have been -- keeping a relationship going strong and healthy without actually being with the other person can be hard. My wife and I had a long distance engagement for a year and a half while I was at the seminary, and while it was certainly the right decision, it's not an ideal choice.

I could say the same thing about faith. The Biblical picture of faithfulness is deeply rooted in the community of God's people, the fellowship and mutual encouragement of struggling side by side to love God above all else, and of course it's hard to love your neighbors as yourself if you have no contact with them. Faith is a relationship with God that's meant to take place within relationships between believers.

Today's Epistle reading from 1 Thessalonians offers a glimpse of a long distance relationship within the community of Christ, and at first glance Paul seems to be suggesting that there are some aspects of his teaching and forming them as Christians that can only take place in person, as he writes, "we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith."

I have to admit that that fits in with my view of what's happened to a lot of churches over the last year and a half. I'm grateful for this congregation and how much you have valued our family of faith here, and continued to come as we gather together. I've heard stories of congregations that have gone nearly a year and a half without meeting in person, doing everything online or over the phone. And some pastors who had previously embraced all the technological options and online "gatherings" are beginning to rethink their enthusiasm as they see how things have developed. I'm thankful we have communication options for those who really are prevented from coming, but overall I find myself thinking that Paul is right and a long distance relationship just isn't the same, just isn't as good as being able to truly be together side by side, the importance of proximity reflected even in the Incarnation of Jesus.

But then, when I look at the rest of 1 Thessalonians, I see that Paul is really not concerned with those people lacking something critical for their faith. Instead, he spends a lot of the letter rejoicing about the faith that they have! He's heard about how they've continued to be faithful and he expresses a great deal of love and affection for them in his happiness.

Paul uses all kinds of relational images to describe his long-distance relationship to the Thessalonians. Paul can describe his own ministry among them as a "nursing mother taking care of her own children" (2:7) and "like a father with his children" (2:11). Paul is both father and mother to these faithful believers, and they are at the same time like his parents, for losing a face to face relationship with the Thessalonians was dramatic from Paul's perspective: "When we were orphaned by being separated from you for a short time (in person, not in thought), out of our intense longing we made every effort to see you" (2:17).

In fact, Paul blames Satan himself for the separation. He reminds them that he has been wanting, again and again, to visit -- and his absence is not because God called him to another place as minister and evangelist, because we know Paul travelled and preached constantly like that, but rather he blames Satan for hindering him. Separation between brothers and sisters in faith is not what God had in mind! The family belongs together, and being separated feels like being orphaned.

So what could Paul only provide in person? What is there he could not include in a letter, or pass along with another messenger like Timothy who had just visited and brought him the good news he's so happy about? Well, one obvious thing is Paul himself. One thing they lack that can only be fixed by being together in person is, well, being together. That is a reunion that would bring joy to Paul and to his friends in Thessalonika And that brings us joy, too. Think back to last April, at the beginning of covid and those four or five weeks when we had drive-in services in the parking lot -- even after just being away for three weeks, many people told me how good it was to be back together. Even in such a strange way, isolated in individual vehicles, many of you told me how happy you were to see your friends and wave to them. Because our faith is not just about knowing the fact, but the communion of the saints.

The way that St. Augustine put it, back around the year 400 or so, was that Paul did not need to add to their faith, as if they were missing something critical or necessary. Rather, he wanted to enrich their faith, to improve and develop it. Not that something was missing, but that what they already had could be made better. We see what he has in mind in the next verses of this passage: "may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." Love for one another and holy living, all based on the foundation of faith in Jesus.

But there's one more long distance relationship here, and Paul mentions that too. "At the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints." We're in relationships that are far more long distance than any earthly separation, and this is where we find ourselves with the theme of the Advent season. We are separated from those who have died in faith, the saints with God in heaven.

And we are separated from Jesus, in a way. We know the promises of Scripture: "I will never leave you nor forsake you," and "I am with you always." We know we're not really separated from Jesus, spiritually speaking. Yet we can't see him with our eyes, touch him with our hands, see the expression on his face or hear his voice in the ways those believers in the Gospels could. We're not spiritually separated, but we are physically separated. Our faith itself is a long distance relationship, in a way -- faith is confidence in things that are not seen, Hebrews says.

Advent looks forward to the day when this long distance relationship will be long distance no longer. Our Lord Jesus is coming with all his saints -- we will no longer be separated from Jesus himself nor from those we love who have died in faith. Just as Paul looks forward to a future reunion with those he misses and cares about in Thessalonika, we all look forward to a future reunion on the Last Day when Jesus comes back. You can wait at the arrivals hall of a big airport and watch these kinds of reunions happen, over and over again; people long separated from loved ones and the joy they have when that person walks in.

Advent looks forward to that reunion with our Lord, with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven together. But for some people, this time of year drives home the separation harder than any other. There is a face missing from the Thanksgiving table. When you think about your Christmas shopping, there's a person who won't be there to open a gift on December the 25th. Separation is caused by broken relationships and bitterness. Separation is caused by the circumstances of the world, covid and travel and distance. Separation is caused by the last enemy of all, death. At this time of year, the distance feels the longest in these kinds of long distance relationships.

Advent teaches us to look at these things in faith, to wait patiently for our Lord's return, and to take joy in what we do have. We are taught to trust Jesus who will remove all such obstacles and difficulties in His good time, either now or in the world to come. We still celebrate in thanksgiving, we still pray earnestly, we still have great joy -- all these things that Paul talks about. And we live by faith until the day comes when we see face to face.

We follow Jesus better when we follow Him together. Our waiting and longing for Christ's return teaches us to long for real relationship with other believers, even when that relationship must sometimes be sustained at a distance. Thank God for the times we are able to meet together face-to-face and supply for each other what is lacking in our faith: in this communion of saints, an ongoing, personal, loving and committed relationship which points us back to Jesus.

Lord's Prayer

**Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be Thy name,
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done on earth
as it is in heaven;
give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those
who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom
and the power and the glory
forever and ever. Amen.**

P: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

C: **Amen.**

All: I thank You, my heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, Your dear Son, that You have kept me this night from all harm and danger; and I pray that You would keep me this day also from sin and every evil, that all my doings and life may please You. For into Your hands I commend myself, my body and soul, and all things. Let Your holy angel be with me, that the evil foe may have no power over me. Amen.

P: Let us bless the Lord!

C: **Thanks be to God!**

P: The almighty and merciful Lord, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, bless and preserve you.

C: **Amen.**