

God Prepares You – 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 - The First Sunday in Advent, Year C

When big things are coming, you want to be prepared. You want to practice that presentation, study for that test, and double check the ingredient supplies before the big meal. And the bigger the event, the more important the prep work. The quiz that counts for one percent of your overall grade probably doesn't merit the same kind of prep as the test that counts for a full third of your grade.

This morning we begin the season of Advent, a season that is all about preparation; we will spend the next four Sundays preparing. But preparing for what? The term "advent" simply means "coming." We are preparing for Jesus' arrival in two ways: to celebrate his first arrival as the baby in Bethlehem's manger at Christmas as well as looking ahead to his second arrival, when he will come to bring us to our eternal home at the last day.

And this preparation, especially for Jesus' second coming, is what Paul is praying that the Thessalonians are prepared for in our reading for this morning. As we were reminded of a couple of weeks ago when we had another reading from **1 Thessalonians**, these Christians in the city of Thessalonica didn't have much time with Paul because when he was there, his enemies chased him out of town so he had to flee to the south. Paul's letters to them are both an effort to teach and correct things that he didn't have time to get to when he was with them in-person, but also to express joy in what they were doing despite not having access to him for a long time. Timothy had returned to Thessalonica to continue to work with them, and his positive report of what was going on seems to be what spurred Paul to write this first letter to that congregation.

And that's how our reading begins: **Indeed, how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have before God on account of you?** Paul and his co-workers in gospel ministry were overjoyed at what God was doing among the Thessalonians. They were thankful that the gospel took hold among them despite its difficult beginnings, thankful that people had been brought to faith in Jesus as their Savior. And they made sure to express their joy to God directly in their prayers of thanksgiving.

But, Paul notes, there was something not *quite* right for the members of this congregation. **Night and day we are praying earnestly to see you in person and to supply what is lacking in your faith.** That may feel like a little bit of a back-handed complement. "We rejoice for the faith God has given you! But, we're also praying that the gaps in your faith may be filled." Now, this isn't that back-handed. Paul isn't saying that there's anything wrong with the Thessalonians. He's simply saying that they are incomplete works-in-progress. There are things they don't understand or don't understand in full, and Paul longs to be able to come to them, to meet again in person to be able to talk, teach, and grow together in those places where there were gaps.

We do well to think about our own faith like this. Molly, Griffin, Lochlan, and Joel and everyone for that matter: You and I are works in progress in regard to our faith. No matter how much we have studied, how confident we are in our knowledge or trust, we all are lacking some things in regard to our faith. That will be true no matter how much we learn and apply and work with God's Word, no matter how many years or decades we are Christians and devote to studying what God has said and done. There's always more to learn and apply.

Acknowledging that is important because it reminds us of what it means to prepare for Jesus' return. It's not like preparing for a big meal with family or even a big test in school. We don't reach a point where we're "done." Preparing for Jesus' return is a constant task, a task that seeks to bring God's Word to the forefront of our thoughts and hearts day-in and day-out. Anytime that God's Word is not a part of our lives, that faith is shrinking, while anytime that God's Word is a part of our lives, that faith is growing and thriving.

There are many ways we may opt to make God's Word a prominent part of our lives. Confirmands and others: perhaps we make it a goal to be in church more often than we have been in the past. Maybe it's a goal to make sure our children are in Sunday School so that they can grow in their faith as well. Maybe it's a goal to participate in a Bible Class where you hadn't made that a priority before. Maybe it's a goal to bring devotions to your breakfast or dinner tables for you personally or your family Or maybe you're already doing all of those things and your goal is to have that Word have more of an impact on the way you live—the way you speak, act, even think, to let God's Word and will for our lives have a more noticeable impact on your day-to-day life than it did before.

We can set all sorts of goals for ourselves in these ways, and they are all commendable. But, unlike pouring over your notes for class or pulling the rolls out of the oven days ahead of a meal, actually making up for what is lacking in our faith is not something that we do for ourselves. That is something that God does. God alone builds up our faith. God prepares us for what is coming. Paul encouraged the Thessalonians: **May the Lord increase your love and make it overflow for each other and for all people, just as ours does for you, so that he may establish your hearts as blameless in holiness before our God and Father, when our Lord Jesus comes with all his saints.**

Look at all the things Paul says happen when God does this for you. He **increases your love and makes it overflow for each other and for all people**. The more you are in God's Word, the more you are hearing of Jesus' free forgiveness for all of your sins, the more that love will naturally show itself. It won't be perfect. You and I will fail to love regularly. We won't treat people around us as those who God himself loves so dearly. But in Jesus we find forgiveness for that lack of love, and in that loving forgiveness we find the strength and encouragement to love one another better. We refine that love to meet needs, to sacrifice for others, to be more patient, more caring, more empathetic, more concerned for other people's fears,

needs, and concerns. That love will break its banks and flood the lives of others in the way that God's love has flooded and enveloped you and me.

The flooding love of God has and continues to do what Paul prays for here: **establish your hearts as blameless in holiness before our God and Father**. When God looks at you and me, he doesn't see sinners; he sees saints, people set apart for his purposes. He sees people who are forgiven. Jesus died for us to take away every sin and then gives us the faith to trust him as our Savior. This faith is his gift to us, which he gives and strengthens through his Word and sacraments. We want this faith to be in our hearts when Jesus returns or he calls us out of this life.

And thanks be to God that he prepares us for the last day in this way! By his Word he reinforces and strengthens our faith, our trust in Jesus as our Savior from all sin. By that strengthening of our faith we continue to be prepared for what is to come, the day of judgment where we will triumph through our triumphing King.

As we think of all the preparation we need to get done in the coming weeks, be it for the end of a semester or the year-end reports at work, or the coming Christmas festivities, keep this other, far more important preparation in your mind. Dig into the Word. Let God prepare you to hear the good news of the arrival of your Savior and prepare you for his return to bring you home! **Amen**.