

First Sunday in Advent  
December 1, 2024  
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church  
A Real Christmas Requires Remembering Why Christ Came  
1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 (EHV)

*Indeed, how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have before God on account of you? <sup>10</sup>Night and day we are praying earnestly to see you in person and to supply what is lacking in your faith.*

*<sup>11</sup>May God our Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. <sup>12</sup>And may the Lord increase your love and make it overflow for each other and for all people, just as ours does for you, <sup>13</sup>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.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

What makes it a real Christmas for you? Of course, you are all going to answer that the birth of Jesus makes every Christmas a real Christmas. And you are correct. Now that we have begun the season of Advent, we have the birth of Christ on our minds. Advent means coming and we look forward at this time of year to celebrating the arrival of Christ in Bethlehem. Every Christmas is a real Christmas when the birth of the Savior is our focus.

But what else makes it a real Christmas for you? Perhaps you are looking forward to that perfect Christmas meal, whatever your family tradition is. You might be looking for those perfect Christmas gifts that will put a smile on the one who opens that gift. Maybe Christmas becomes real when the tree goes up or the lights and decorations are complete. Maybe it is the family gathering or a certain Christmas tradition that you look forward to every year. In addition to the good news of great joy that our Savior has been born, we look forward to all the extras. We want everything about the celebration of the advent of Christ to go perfectly.

In the Word of God from 1 Thessalonians 3 today, we hear Paul express the hope that everything also goes perfectly for the second advent of Christ. When Jesus returns, Paul wants us to have hearts that are blameless in holiness. During Advent it is good for us to remember that the reason for Christ's first advent was to prepare us for his second.

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Paul spent about three weeks in Thessalonica, preaching the gospel in the synagogue. The Jews who did not believe rounded up a mob and Paul had to be taken out of the city that night by some of the believers. But the angry mob pursued him to the next town of Berea and Paul was again taken away by his friends, this time to Athens. As Paul carries on the mission work in Athens he is very concerned about the new believers in Thessalonica. They would be under intense pressure and persecution to return to their Jewish or pagan roots. So, Paul sent a young, pastor in training, named Timothy, to see how they were doing. The Word of God before us this morning is part of Paul's reaction to Timothy's report.

God had preserved these new believers in their faith in Christ. Paul was overjoyed and did not know how to express his great thanks to the Lord. These believers may or may not have celebrated Christmas annually like we do, but they knew why Christ came. Paul's message was

summed up in those three weeks by “the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead” (Acts 17:3). For them and for us to be found blameless on the day Christ returns, Christ first had to suffer, die and rise from the dead. This is why we have the account of Palm Sunday on the first Sunday of Advent. The Son of God was born to one day go to Jerusalem, and instead of being crowned King at the end of that week, he would be crowned with thorns. He had to suffer so that our hearts may be cleansed of sin and guilt. He had to die to pay for the sin of the world.

Therefore, we use the season of Advent as a time of repentance. We know our hearts have not been blameless in holiness. We know the sins we have hidden from others, and we know that God knows the sins we have hidden even from ourselves. As we repent, we remember the reason for Christ’s advent. He cleansed our hearts from sin. As Jeremiah prophesied, the Savior would be the Lord our Righteousness. Christ has a blameless heart and through faith in him, that blamelessness is credited to us. His righteousness covers us. Through him, we will stand before our God and Father on the last day with blameless and holy hearts because our Savior was born for us, lived for us, and died for us. Thanks be to the Lord Jesus Christ for his grace and mercy!

When my children ask what present I want this year, I have to make the dad joke and say that the only present I want is their presence. The more birthdays we have, the more we realize that gifts are much less precious than time with those we love. Paul loved the believers in Thessalonica and prayed to see them again.

*<sup>10</sup>Night and day we are praying earnestly to see you in person and to supply what is lacking in your faith. <sup>11</sup>May God our Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.*

The Holy Spirit had brought these believers to a relatively mature faith in just a few weeks of teaching by Paul. They believed in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They believed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God who died and rose again. They believed that they would be blameless on the day of Christ’s return through the forgiveness of sins. But Paul says there is more. He wants to supply what is lacking in their faith. God has revealed so much in the Scriptures that three weeks cannot cover everything. They can gain more knowledge of the Lord Jesus, more trust in more of God’s promises, more instructions on living a Christian life.

What about you? Is there anything lacking in your faith? Most of you were brought to faith more than three weeks ago. Most of us here have been in God’s Word for years and decades. What could be lacking in our faith? First of all, we are not lacking in saving faith. Jesus has forgiven you and you will stand before him on the last day with a blameless heart because of all he has done. But that is not all there is in the Bible. That is not all God wants to us trust and know. If there are parts of the Bible you have never read, the beginning of the new Church Year would be a good time to start filling in those parts. For all of the Scriptures is given for our learning and growing in faith.

Many times, we don’t know what we don’t know. We think we have a strong faith. We think all the gaps are covered and we are not lacking anything important in our faith. Perhaps we listen to the readings on Sunday mornings and wonder how that applies to me. I’ll never be in that situation. I already knew that. But God is supplying what is lacking as we are in his Word even when we don’t see how it applies now. He may be preparing us for a challenge to our faith that he knows is coming. He may be preparing us for an opportunity to be a light for the gospel that we can’t imagine. Being in the Word supplies what is lacking in our faith, so we do not fall away from being blameless on the day of Christ’s second advent.

Being with other believers is a great encouragement too. Paul longed to see his friends again. Maybe you know someone who has been missing out on this encouragement and the Word of God on Sundays. They used to attend regularly but not anymore. This time of year is a wonderful time to invite them to join you in the pew. Maybe this person has rarely or never been in a Christian church before. What a great time to invite them to learn about the Son of God who came the first time to prepare us for the day of judgment.

Paul's great desire to see the believers in Thessalonica and provide what is lacking in their faith was not just a pious wish. He went to the Lord in prayer with his petitions. He "prayed earnestly" for them. Share your concern about someone's faith with the only One who can give and strengthen faith, the Lord our God. You could use the time of silent prayer on Sunday to pray for those who have not been here for some time. Pray for those who are struggling. Pray for those who are home bound. Pray for those who are away at school, away in the military or away for any other reason. Pray that the Lord would bring his faith giving Word to all those we love and miss. Pray that he would keep them all in the one, true faith so that they may have blameless hearts, cleansed by Christ, on the day of his return.

Whatever your picture of a real and perfect Christmas is here on earth, it is nothing compared to the celebration on the second advent of Christ. At that time, we will be together with Christ and all his saints and angels, holy and blameless before him. At that time, we will lack nothing in our faith for faith will have become sight. At that time will not need to pray for an increase of love for our love will be complete and perfect and endure forever. Although we can never thank our God enough for the joy of our salvation through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ, we will have an eternity to thank and praise him. A real Christmas requires remembering why Christ came and rejoicing to see him again.

Amen.