

# "Ready and Waiting"

1 Corinthians 1:3-9

November 27, 2011

The First Sunday in Advent

It's hard to believe it is here again – that time of waiting for a very special event. You will be pressured into doing a lot to prepare for it. You will wonder if you will ever get everything done. You will be made to feel guilty because you didn't do more. You will hardly be able to enjoy the time until it gets here. And, when it does get here, you will be worried that you aren't ready for it.

What am I talking about? Christmas? No. I'm not talking about Christmas – the 1<sup>st</sup> coming of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – although there are a lot of preparations (mostly secular preparations having nothing to do with His birth) to be made for the celebration of that event. I'm talking about the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming of Christ and all that is involved with that. Advent is the time set aside by the Church to emphasize that. During the time of Advent, there is often a lot of talk about preparing for Christ to come again.

The reason for the preparation is the purpose of His coming. It is as we confess in the Apostles' Creed: "From thence [heaven] He will come to judge the living and the dead." While the world may, to some extent, be willing to acknowledge the coming of Christ at Christmas, either as a cute story or cultural tradition, many in the world, along with some Christians, want nothing to do with a coming for judgment for two reasons. First, we live in a world where the greatest "sin" is to judge anyone. Therefore, judgment is inherently unacceptable for many. Secondly, the final result of Christ's judgment is the consignment of every human being who has ever lived to either heaven or hell. While people are willing to accept the concept of heaven, no one wants to think of hell.

But the Bible clearly proclaims a final judgment. We read about it last week. Some will hear Jesus say to them, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world." Yet, at the same time, others will hear Jesus say to

them, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”

It is that fear of the possibility of hell which drives a lot of Advent sermons about being ready as we wait for Christ’s return. Some will hear about the need for individual moral reform. If people go to hell because they are bad, then we need to turn away from sin and do better if we want to be ready to go to heaven when Jesus returns.

Some will hear about the need for individual spiritual reform. People are all caught up in the secularization of the holiday season with shopping, partying, and so on. We need to get more spiritual – read the Bible more, use special Advent devotional materials, and come to church more – if we want to be ready to welcome Jesus when He returns.

Some will look at the church to be ready for Christ’s return. We may measure attendance, dollars, or activities and conclude that the church needs to improve. The church is not doing enough to reach new people for Christ. The church is not doing enough to motivate members to serve Christ. Something is lacking morally or spiritually.

What do all these guilt-ridden sermons about our need to prepare and improve, either morally or spiritually, individually or corporately accomplish? Not much. A few individuals and congregations might have a sense of pride and feel that they are doing everything necessary as they wait for Christ to return.

For many more, it will be a different story. Such Advent thoughts lead to despair. People will feel guilty because they aren’t doing enough. They are failing morally as they continue to struggle with sin and act just like their unchurched neighbors. They are failing spiritually because they are not worshiping more during this holy time but less as they let their secular holiday commitments rule their lives. Churches will feel that they are failing because they lack what is necessary to reach out to unbelievers and they lack what is necessary to run their programs and activities. Individually and

together, we knock ourselves out try to do more and more now so that we will be ready for Christ to come in the future.

However, the preparation needed to make our church ready for Christ's return or any individual here ready for Christ's return does not lie in some future event or present behavior. It lies in the distant past. The preparation does not consist in our activity towards God but God's activity towards and for us.

Long ago, in the Garden of Eden, when sin was new in the world, God began preparing us for eternity. He promised that He would send someone to crush the devil's head. Over the centuries, God made more promises about this rescuer. He would be Immanuel – "God with us" - born of a virgin in Bethlehem. He would come to pay for His people's sins through His suffering and death. His purpose was so clear that Isaiah spoke of it as if it had already occurred, "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed." (Is. 53:5)

Jesus came in fulfillment of these prophecies and many more. He is true God, born of a virgin in Bethlehem as the prophets foretold. He grew up and went to a cross to be pierced for our transgression, crushed for our iniquities, to endure the punishment of God which brought us peace with God, and to heal us of all our spiritual deficiencies and diseases by His wounds. This act prepared all of humanity for eternity by removing the only impediment to eternal life, namely sin.

He crushed the devil's head at Calvary, overturned death, and rose from the grave to life again. This act prepared all of humanity to live after death with Him in heaven forever. He ascended into heaven, vowing to prepare a place for us and promising to return and take us to that already prepared place. All the preparation for Christ's return is already completed and is given to us freely as our text for today indicates.

But are we really ready? Look at our lives. Look at our church. If you think we have problems or that our church has problems, the church in Corinth was far worse. Morally, there were problems.

There was jealousy and strife. They permitted sexual immorality – a man sleeping with his father’s wife – in their midst. They were suing each other in court and participating in pagan practices.

Spiritually, they were always looking for something new and better. They were looking for a more vibrant worship life through speaking in tongues. They wanted a pastor with more pizzazz than plainspoken Paul and often fought over who was the best previous pastor. They abused the Lord’s Supper with their incorrect understanding of it and their incorrect practice of it. Some denied the resurrection of Christ.

If there were any congregation or any individual Christian which seemed unprepared for Christ’s return, it was the people of Corinth. Yet Paul thanks God for them. He then proceeds to tell them that, despite all of their problems, they had everything they needed.

God had given them His grace by which they had come to faith and had been saved. They were spiritually wealthy. The testimony about Christ had been confirmed among them as people came to faith through the Word. They were not lacking in any spiritual gift to carry out their ministry. They could wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ on the Last Day with confidence and peace because God would sustain them to the end and would declare them guiltless – without any sin to condemn them to hell.

How could Paul say all of this to this troubled congregation? The answer is easy. What they had received had prepared them and would sustain them, not their own efforts. God had prepared them and He was faithful. He would keep them prepared.

The same is true for us today. Each of us struggles with sin or faith and therefore may fear the judgment. We try to improve in preparation for Christ’s coming by being more moral or more spiritual, but we fail. Our best efforts, our Old Testament lesson says, “are like a polluted garment.” (Isaiah 64:6).

Our church struggles. Whether it be with lack of dollars, lack of members, or lack of dedication, we worry. Will we as a congregation be able to carry out our ministry? Will we, as a whole, be prepared for Christ's coming?

The answer is a resounding YES! God has given us grace by which we have come to faith and received the blessings of Christ's work on the cross – forgiveness, life, and salvation. The testimony about Christ is constantly being confirmed among us as people come to faith in Holy Baptism, are comforted by His Word, and strengthened by His Supper. Our group is not lacking any spiritual gift needed to carry out our ministry here. We can wait for the coming of Christ on the Last Day with confidence and peace, knowing that we are fully prepared. God's efforts for us, not our efforts for Him, have prepared us. He is faithful. He will keep us.

Our problem is not becoming prepared, but living as prepared people. How do we do that? First of all, we don't worry about being good enough to meet the Lord at His coming. He has taken our sinfulness to the cross and given us His holiness. We will be declared guiltless on that day.

Second of all, we don't worry about carrying out the ministry the Lord has given to us as individuals and as a congregation. We are fully equipped to do this and lack nothing. However, we do lack the will to use God's gifts at times. I remember a cartoon which showed a pastor greeting a group of parishioners after a worship service. The pastor had a glum look on his face while the person he was talking to had a smile on his face and said, "Pastor, we are sure glad that you said in your sermon that you don't know where you were going to get the money to meet the church budget. For a second there, we thought you were going to ask us for it." We have the gifts we need to serve the Lord! It is removing our grip from them and unloosing them for God's service that is the challenge. Simply live out your calling in your various vocations, using your diverse gifts for the Lord's purpose. We will do just fine.

Thirdly, to live without fear or guilt and to live out your vocation, make use of the means by which God has enriched you. Recall your baptism for the assurance you need when you doubt

whether you are a member of God's family. Use the Word of God to direct you in living out your calling. Partake of the Lord's Supper often to strengthen your bond with Christ.

There is nothing to fear. There is nothing to worry about. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord." "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6) Amen.