

"Preparation, Patience, and Peace"

2 Peter 3:8-14

December 4, 2011

2nd Sunday in Advent

People are always looking for helpful hints for having a happy Christmas. It's always good if these hints can be easily memorized. I would like to suggest that there are three "P" words that are the key for us at this time of year: preparation, patience, and peace.

Never is there a time that requires more preparation than this time of year. There is shopping to be done, cookies to be baked, cards to signed, addressed, and mailed, and many other things. We knock ourselves out trying to prepare for the holiday, because, without the proper preparation there is a lot of disappointment and unhappiness. And, not matter how hard we try to prepare, it sees like we don't get everything done. We always are lacking in some area of preparation.

Patience, although necessary for everyone's mental health, is something often in short supply. Children can't wait for Christmas to come. When I was a child, I was sure that it was a scientific fact that the month between Thanksgiving and Christmas was longer than any other month in the year. This lack of patience causes great excitement in children. Adults, on the other hand, also have a lack of patience, but it leads to stress and conflict instead of excitement. Adults are impatient towards their children, spouses, merchants, and anyone else they encounter during this time. Impatience comes from worry over not being prepared.

Peace – where do we find *that* during this hectic time? Although we claim to be celebrating the birth of the Prince of Peace who was bringing "peace on earth, goodwill to men", there seems to be no peace. Not only are we hurrying around to prepare for the holiday, we also hurry around to celebrate the holiday with this party here and that concert there and so on. We experience little, if no, peace.

As helpful as these words may be as we consider Jesus' first coming as the Baby in Bethlehem, the three P words are also necessary as we consider Jesus' second coming as judge. Yet they don't seem to fare any better.

There is a lot of talk about preparation as we wait for Jesus' return and the end of the world. Motivated often by fear or guilt, we strive for moral preparation – to clean up our lives, to cut down on our sin, and to increase the good we do. We strive for spiritual preparation – to have more faith or be more spiritual. There is also a lot of talk, especially during the 2nd week in Advent when we hear the prophesy of Isaiah, about preparing the way of the Lord and its fulfillment in John the Baptist who preached a strong message of repentance. We worry if we are sorry enough for our sins or if we have given up enough sin as we think the term repentance implies.

There is often a lot of encouragement to be patient as we wait for the end of the world and judgment. Like in our celebration of Christmas, there is lack of patience. And, like Christmas, the impatience is either because we can't wait for Jesus to come again and take us home to heaven or because we wonder if He ever will come again. As the world gets worse and worse and as Jesus' delay becomes longer and longer, we wonder if we've been wrong about this all along.

And then there's peace. There seems to be doubt. There seems to be worry. There seems to be fear and uncertainty. But there seems to be no peace. We lack peace because we feel unprepared for Christ's judgment. We lack peace because we are uncertain of when or if He will return.

Maybe the problem here is our perspective. We are looking at these three "P" words – preparation, patience, and peace – from our perspective. As sinful human beings, that's never a good thing. Let's look at these same three words from God's perspective.

Preparation for Jesus' return as judge of the living and the dead is not something for us to do. As I said last week, it is something which only God can do and which He has done through His Son, Jesus Christ. Worried that you are not prepared to be good enough to stand before Christ on

Judgment Day? That's something God has taken care of through Jesus' perfect life on your behalf and sacrificial death in your place. Your sins have been washed away in the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, when He died on the cross. In your baptism, you not only receive the forgiveness for all sins of thought, word, and deed – the bad that you've done and the good that you've failed to do, but you are also joined to Christ and His righteousness – His holiness. You are good enough for judgment because, in God's eyes, you have been declared holy for the sake of Jesus.

Not spiritual enough? That's something which God has taken care of, as well. He has prepared you to receive the gifts won for you by Christ by giving you faith as the ultimate gift. As the Scripture says, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast." (Eph. 2:8-9) Faith, given by God through Baptism and the preaching of the Word, is the empty hand into which God has placed all other gifts: forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Repentance is not something which we struggle to do to make up for our sins. That was the idea of penance which Luther struggled with at the time of the Reformation. Rather, repentance is sorrow over sin and faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of that sin. Repentance, like faith, the Scripture says (Acts 11:18) is also a gift of God given through His Word

What about the second "P" word – patience? There is patience in this time of waiting, despite the seeming slowness in Christ's return, but it is not *our* patience. It is God who has the patience. We look at what seems a long delay in Jesus coming to judge and see that as a bad thing. We look on Jesus' return like children looking to Christmas: it's something so good that we just can't wait for it to be here.

That's because we are only focusing on ourselves and our salvation. The Lord in His great love and mercy for all people is concerned about all people being saved. He is not being slow in keeping His promise to return. He is being patient. As Peter writes, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his

promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you , not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”

As far as lack of patience on our part because we wonder if Jesus will ever really come again, there is no doubt. He WILL come again. “The day of the Lord will come like a thief”. In other words, He will come when we least expect it. In addition to the final judgment, Peter says some pretty terrifying things will occur. “[T]he heavens will pass away with a roar, and the [elements] will be burned up and dissolved.....the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the [elements] will melt as they burn!”

That leads to the third “P” word – peace. How can we have any peace as we think, not only about judgment, but about the destruction of the heavens and the earth? Peter asks a similar question, “Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness?”

If you were around 50 years or so ago, you remember the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. There was a lot of fear of the heavens and earth being burned up and dissolved, only not by God, but by mankind in a great nuclear war. In fact, I remember this text being touted as a prophesy of such a holocaust. As a result, many frightened people built bomb shelters to protect themselves if such a war came. Now, whether or not such shelters could have ever protected people, they did give people a sense of peace in the midst of their fearful anticipation of the possible end of the world.

God has given us a “bomb shelter” of sorts as we wait for the certain end of the world. That structure is the Church – not just this particular congregation, but the Holy Christian Church. Here, in the Church, we live out lives of holiness and piety. We are covered with Christ’s holiness in our baptism. We live out lives of holiness, not by necessarily doing great acts of religiosity, but by living out our vocations as mother/father, husband/wife, student/employee and so on with Christ living in us

and through us. This may not be very exciting, but it is pleasing to God and beneficial to our neighbor.

Here, we live out our piety – in other words, our manner of life in relationship with God. We gather around His Word in Divine Service. His Word forgives us, comforts us, guides us, and encourages us. His Supper strengthens our bond to Christ and to each other. As we gather here, we are not fulfilling a religious duty. We are experiencing peace. It is, as a well know prayer says, “a peace which the world cannot give.” We experience peace from sins forgiven, holiness granted, and eternity assured.

We are able to look forward with peace to the Lord's coming and, according to His promise, new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. At His coming, we will "be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace." Therefore, we hunger more and more for His Word and Sacrament as the times get worse that we might have a taste of that peace now and so that we might be ready to experience that peace for all eternity.

Sometimes it may not be so easy to remember the main points of a sermon, but, today, you should not have that problem. Three words – all beginning with "P": preparation, patience, and peace. Those words may represent only an ideal or a goal for your celebration of the Lord's first coming as a baby at Christmas. However, these words are a guarantee for your eager waiting for the Lord's second coming as judge on the Last Day. God has prepared you fully for that. He is patient in waiting for more to receive it. And He gives you peace as you wait for the final consummation. Preparation, patience, and peace. Amen.