

"Completed Preparation"
Philippians 1:2-11

December 9, 2018

2nd Sunday of Advent

We currently find ourselves in a time of frenzied preparation. I don't have to tell you this. Unless you've been living under a rock, you can't help but notice the hype on television, the Internet, and interaction among people about preparing for Christmas. There is a lot of preparation going on: houses and trees to be decorated, cards and letters to be written and sent, cookies and other treats to be shopped for and baked, gifts to be bought and wrapped, and the list of preparations goes on and on.

The preparation for this happy event can be quite a burden. Many people find this simply too stressful and they do one of two things. They knock themselves out in order to get every preparation done – every cookie baked, every Christmas card sent, every gift wrapped, and so on – to the point where they can't even enjoy Christmas. Or, they simply give up on some or all of the preparations needed which causes them to miss out on some very enjoyable things. Wouldn't it be nice if you could be guaranteed that all of your preparation for the future Christmas celebration would be done and that you wouldn't have to be the one to do it?

There is another season besides this secular Christmas season which involves preparation. It may be less frenzied than what you see going on around you, but no less important. It takes place almost exclusively in the Christian Church and is called Advent. It is different than Christmas, not only in name and where it is celebrated (I doubt that, if you took a poll of people outside the church, anyone would know what Advent is), but in its purpose, as well. Christmas is something you prepare for. Advent is itself preparation for something far greater. Here, too, it would be very nice to be guaranteed that all of this preparation would be completed and that it would be done by somebody else.

Advent is more than pre-Christmas. It is more than just an opportunity to put beautiful blue parents on our altars or have yet another reason for soup suppers. Advent is not prepared for, but is itself preparation. What is Advent preparation? Perhaps, it would be better to start with what Advent preparation is not.

Advent is not a time of material preparation. There are no gifts, cards, food, or parties for Advent. That is why it is often overlooked or unknown because the material aspects of Christmas simply overwhelmed.

Advent, strictly speaking, is not a time to prepare for the birth of Jesus. We cannot prepare for something that has already happened.

Advent preparation is not intended to be a happy time, at least happy as the world defines happiness. It is a rather solemn time marked by the deletion of the Gloria in Excelsis from our Divine Service liturgy and the inclusion of many hymns in minor keys like the closing hymn for today.

Finally, Advent preparation is not something for only some people – super Christians or really religious people. Advent is something necessary and needed by all people.

What is Advent preparation? It is a time of spiritual preparation for the heart and for the soul. While Advent does include meditating on Jesus' coming as a baby, born in Bethlehem on Christmas, to die and save us from our sin, the major emphasis of Advent preparation is on Jesus' second coming in glory for judgment and salvation. There is a spirit of solemnity and sorrow in our preparation for Advent. Advent emphasizes WHY Jesus came – because we had sinned and fallen away from God; and WHAT Jesus came to do – to suffer, bleed, die, and experience hell; and not just that Jesus came as a cute baby in a sweet story.

Advent preparation involves recognizing the sin in our life and repenting (that is, turning away completely from it) of it in preparation for our Lord's return and His judging of the world. We try to get out of all of this by denying the seriousness of the matter. We tried to drown out the call of Advent to repent by filling our lives with the pleasures of the secular world at this time or by skipping ahead past Advent to the joy of Christmas. In that way, we don't have to think of our sin or being prepared for Judgment Day.

We can also try to get out of Advent preparation by strongly condemning sin and calling for other people to repent – those evil wicked sinners out there. That's what the people did in the time of John the Baptist. They believed that repentance was a necessary thing for those Gentile sinners. What amazed them about the ministry of John the Baptist was not his harsh call for repentance, but who he was calling to repentance. He was not calling the heathen or the Gentiles to repentance, but the people of God, the nation of Israel. His ministry took place on the other side of the Jordan River, a place technically outside of the nation of Israel. He called for people to be baptized, a procedure for non-Jews to enter the nation of Israel. He was essentially saying that it was time for a brand-new beginning for the people of Israel – for them to exit the Promised Land and start all over again by entering the nation and being baptized. For those who were merely curious about John and came out to see what was going on, John had harsh words for them. He called them "brood of vipers" and warned them about depending upon their spiritual heritage as children of Abraham, rather than repenting and trusting in the Lord.

Advent preparation involves true repentance for sin. Do not think of sin and the need of repentance as being only for nonbelievers and really evil people. It is for you. It is for me. Do not rely upon your confirmation day or your lifelong membership in the Lutheran Church to get you by. Instead, acknowledge your sin instead of overlooking it or hiding it. Be truly sorry for that sin instead of being apathetic or defiant over it.

Secondly, Advent preparation involves a renewed and reinvigorated faith in Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. Jesus has done all that is necessary to redeem us (that is, to buy us back) by gaining holiness for us through His perfect obedience to the Law of God; by earning forgiveness for all of our sins through His death on the cross as a sacrifice for sin; and by obtaining eternal life for us through His resurrection from the dead to life again. By the grace of God we receive all of that through faith in Jesus Christ.

Yet we often fail to see the need for a renewed and reinvigorated faith. Passing confirmation is good enough for some people. Having their names written on the

membership list of some church is good enough for some people. Having some sort of self-centered belief in God is good enough for some people.

However, many people who claim to be Christians themselves do not regularly come flocking to the place where forgiveness and salvation are doled out: the Church. Other things take precedence, especially at this time of year. I can only conclude that such people don't feel the need for forgiveness due to a lack of sin or they simply don't care.

Thirdly, Advent preparation emphasizes the fruits worthy of repentance. In other words, how does one live after turning away from sin to trust in Jesus Christ? Does the work of Jesus and the faith that receives it merely become a "get out of jail free card" for when you die? Not at all.

During the time of John the Baptist's ministry, he had strong words for those who were merely curious about baptism and the life of faith or believe that simply being baptized or circumcised – going through the motions of the ceremony – were enough. John says, "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." To those who refused to produce "fruits of repentance" – a life of good works in service, John warns, "Even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." Repentance is more than feeling bad. Faith is more than simply believing in Jesus. True sorrow and true faith will show themselves in a change life full of good works.

This is pretty difficult preparation. What we think is busy and difficult preparation for the Christmas season pales in comparison. It seems impossible to do which is why so many people want to cover it up or avoid thinking about it. The fact of the matter is: it is impossible for us to do on our own. But there is someone who does this preparation for us.

In our epistle lesson, St. Paul is writing to one of his favorite congregations in the city of Philippi. He had had a strong working relationship with this congregation, referring to it as "your partnership in the Gospel." They had supported Paul and his missionary endeavors, both with their prayers and their financial gifts. The temptation would be for Paul to brag about them and give them credit for how faithful they had been.

This wouldn't help us at all, but would probably make it worse. It's like commercials and testimonials for products that help you lose weight, get in shape, stop smoking, and so on. Hearing people say how the product had helped them with their problems and seeing how thin they were, how in shape they are, and how they had stopped smoking, doesn't really help you with the same problems, does it? It just makes you feel bad. Now, in addition to still being overweight, out of shape, and smoking, you feel guilty about it because you're not one of them.

We are not the Philippians. However, the words of St. Paul to the Philippians give us comfort and give us hope. For Paul does not brag about them and attribute their true repentance, strengthened faith, and fruits in keeping with repentance to themselves. Rather, he says, "I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

In other words, it was God who had accomplished in them repentance, faith, and actions. He began those things in them, carried them through their lives in them, and would surely bring it to completion when the Lord Jesus returned. We have the same God who does the same for us. He doesn't zap you with some magical formula to change you. He uses simple "means", that is, ways of accomplishing His work.

He began a good work in you when you received Holy Baptism. He washed away your sins, gave you the gift of faith, sent the Holy Spirit to live within you, and gave you, who were dead in sin, a completely new life.

He calls you to repentance through the Holy Scriptures. By hearing them, reading them, meditating on them, and studying them, the Holy Scriptures are able to make you see your sin, produce genuine sorrow and repentance within you, and receive forgiveness for your sin on a regular basis.

God nurtures your faith and makes it strong by feeding it in the Holy Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. By receiving Jesus' body and Jesus' blood in and with the bread and the wine, your faith becomes stronger and able to produce the fruits of repentance.

We can be sure, as the faithful Philippians were sure, that he (God) who began that good work in you will bring it to completion when our Lord comes in glory. As with Paul's prayer for the Philippians, so it is with us: our love "may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."

As the new life of our Baptism remains strong through sincere repentance brought about by the Word of God and the strong faith wrought in us by the Lord's Supper, we will naturally produce the fruits of repentance in a life of good works as a result of faith, and not the cause of it. It will become so secondhand for us and done so naturally, that we will not even be aware that we are doing it. As Jesus' instruction of the final judgment in Matthew 25 tells us, He will praise the good works of God's people, including you and me, and our response will be that we didn't even know we were doing them.

And so, we will be found to be blameless on the day when the Lord returns through the blood of the Lamb, Jesus Christ, shed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sin and received by faith. Yet it was not we who prepared ourselves for that day, but God doing all of the preparation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, His Son, and doing all of the work for us to receive the benefits of Jesus' work through His Holy Word and by means of the Sacraments – Holy Baptism and Lord's Supper.

Constantly and consistently be where God is preparing people through these means in Divine Worship, public study of the Word of God, and privately reading this Word and meditating upon it, and God who has begun this good work in you, will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ when you will be pure and blameless, filled with the fruits of righteousness. He will have done all the preparation. And, in this busy time of year, when all of us have so much we need to prepare ourselves for the holidays, isn't this good to know? Amen