

Advent 1st Sunday “Establish our Hearts to be Blameless” 1 Thess 3

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

It is the season when Christians make preparations to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, and there are only a few weeks remaining to do so! This Sunday also marks the beginning of a new church year. As the church celebrates and remembers Christ’s First Advent, Christians also wait in hope for Christ’s Second Advent. Now we live in the “between time” as we move ever-closer to the consummation of the age.

We lit the first candle on the Advent wreath, the prophecy candle, or candle of hope, and the readings for Advent 1 highlight prophecy, hope, and what the Christian is to do in the “between times” of Christ’s advents.

Today we look at our 3 readings and see a common theme that God is in control and He can do anything, including empowering us to do His will.

In our Jeremiah reading we heard YHWH promise, “Behold, the days are coming when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and He shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which He will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’”.

This promise was fulfilled as God broke into our time and space, working out that righteousness for the unrighteous through Jesus’s life, death, and resurrection. Justice was executed upon God’s own son as He took on the punishment for the sin of the world. Yes, the Lord became our righteousness as His righteousness was imputed to us and we wear it like a holy garment.

A little context helps us to understand the reading from 1 Thessalonians. Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica and Paul preached the gospel for three Sabbaths.

Jealous Jews formed a mob and took Jason and other believing Jews who had received Paul and Silas, brought them before the authorities, and accused them of acting against the decrees of Caesar. The brothers, in the meantime, sent Paul and Silas away (Acts 17:1–10).

It is difficult to determine how long Paul and his companions were in Thessalonica. However, given the familial-type relationships that developed between the Thessalonian Christians and Paul and his companions, as well as textual evidence that Paul worked while he was among them (2 Thes 3:7–10), and that he received help “once and again” from the Christians in Philippi (Phil 4:16), Paul and his companions probably spent some months among them rather than two weeks. Even so, Paul didn’t get to spend as much time in Thessalonica as he had hoped.

Paul had a pastoral relationship with the Thessalonians, and also a relationship with them as a “nursing mother taking care of her own children,” as a father who exhorts and encourages his children, and as brothers and sisters loved by God (2:7, 11; 1:4). It is this familial concern that is behind this epistle. Paul was “torn away” from them according to what we are told in the Book of Acts (2:17, cf. Acts 17:1–10), and he was anxious to know if they had abandoned the faith because of harassments, doubts, and slander levied against them and Paul. Not knowing if they remained faithful is what drove Paul to send Timothy back to Thessalonica, and waiting for the report was probably the hardest part for him. Upon his return, Timothy brought the good news that indeed the new Christians had remained firm in the faith. This news brought exceeding joy and thanksgiving to Paul and his companions, which brings us to today’s Epistle reading.

First, Paul is filled with so much joy that he asks rhetorically how he can repay God. Then, he says he would love to see the Thessalonians once again face to face to “supply what is lacking in their faith.” In other words, to prepare and put their faith in the proper condition through correction and instruction, which is what follows in chapters 4 and 5.

Then, in verses 12-13 Paul says, “May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Paul prays for the Thessalonians, namely that the Lord would cause love to increase and overflow in abundance for one another and for all. Notice the words, “for all.” Paul does not only encourage brotherly love among the Christians; he also encourages the Thessalonians to love those outside of the congregation. They were to love, and demonstrate that love to, the very ones who persecuted and pressured them, tried to create doubts in their hearts, and who slandered them and Paul. We should learn from that example.

The second thing for which Paul prayed is, “that the Lord would do for them *in the context of* their increased love for one another.” Paul’s concern was that the Thessalonians be blameless and holy at Christ’s second coming. Paul’s prayer was that they be “blameless” in respect to their outward conduct with one another as well as the world, and in holiness with respect to their relationship with God and Christ.

This sounds like the Law and, of course, God’s will for our lives **is** heavy Law without Christ. In fact, it fits perfectly what Jesus told the disciples saying, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.” This convicted the disciples and cast them entirely upon the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. So, Jesus then applied the Gospel saying, “For man this is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” Yes, Jesus is our righteousness.

We see this in many places in the Bible. Hebrews 13:21 says, “Now may the God of peace...equip you with every good thing, that you may do His will, working in you that which is pleasing in His sight;” Philippians 2:13 says “For it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” Yes indeed, God through Christ Jesus does establish us blameless in holiness before Him.

And finally, we come to the Gospel reading which finds the Messiah moving to Jerusalem in the midst of people who are rejoicing and praising God (Lk 19:28–40). Jesus knows what the crowds do not know, namely that the righteous branch, Jesus, must move to the cursed tree of the cross, in order to bring righteousness to the very people who will call for his blood by the end of the week. Though the crowd surrounds Jesus with shouts of praise and joy, He makes His way down the path that only He is able to travel—alone. This is Jesus’ mission according to God’s plan. And it begins with a little baby, born to humble parents, in the village of Bethlehem whose coming we consider during the season of Advent.

We who are baptized have received Christ’s righteousness through faith. But what are we Christians supposed to do now? And how are we supposed to live out our faith while waiting for Christ’s promised return? The answer is simple: the Christian is to trust in the Lord. But that’s often easier said than done. Psalm 25 is the prayer of the Christian who walks the righteous road. It is an impossible road without the Lord who walks with his people:

To you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
O my God, in you I trust; let me not be put to shame;
let not my enemies exult over me.
Indeed, none who wait for you shall be put to shame;
they shall be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
Make me to know your ways, O LORD;
teach me your paths.
Lead me in your truth and teach me,
for you are the God of my salvation;
for you I wait all the day long.
Remember your mercy, O LORD, and your steadfast love,
for they have been from of old...
For your name's sake, O LORD, pardon my guilt, for it is great...
The friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him,
and He makes known to them His promises.

Where is your focus this season? Is it on your Christmas plans coming up in a few weeks or is it on Christ's Second Advent?" The Thessalonians faced the kind of persecution, pressure, and slander that create doubt. Many of **you** are faced with situations that, perhaps are not life and death, but do involve the possible loss of home, jobs or family. These things can make the Advent walk difficult and challenging. However, we never walk this walk alone, because the One who walked to Calvary continues to walk with us and to lead us.

As we walk toward Bethlehem, Calvary, Easter and onward toward the Second Advent, Christ walks alongside us as our encourager, our friend, our Righteousness, our Rock, and our Redeemer. The One who could make even the very stones sing His praises, He establishes us as righteous before our God. He will never leave or forsake us.

And may the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit abide in you to life everlasting. Amen!