

That We May ... Supply What is Lacking in Your Faith

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: A few weeks ago, at the beginning of November, we set our clocks back one hour to begin what's called "Daylight Savings Time" – which seems to me to be misnamed. I mean, we don't save any actual daylight by resetting our clocks. There's going to be the same number of hours of light no matter what we do. All we really got was an extra hour of sleep, which we're going to have to pay back in the spring. So in the end we won't have saved or gained anything.

However, in the church today, we're setting the clock back even farther. We're beginning a new church year with the season of Advent, which means "before the coming". Last week, we ended the church year looking forward to Christ's glorious return on the Last Day; but now we make the mental shift backward to the time before his first coming in order to live again with the saints of old the events that brought our Lord into this world and eventually took him to the cross where he died to save us. Interestingly enough, even though we're taking this colossal step backward, the theme of last week's worship service and today's is the same. It's preparedness: making sure that we are ready for the Lord when he comes – when he comes to be born, when he comes to die, when he comes to us today in his Word and Sacraments, and when he comes to us again in glory on the Last Day. And whereas setting the clocks back for Daylight Savings Time didn't really save anything, we're taking this long leap back for the purpose of saving souls – both our own and those of others – precisely by making sure that *we are* prepared to meet the Lord when he comes.

St. Paul knew that the majority of the members of the church at Thessalonica were not prepared for the Lord's coming. And it's small wonder, for the congregation there was very young; probably less than a year old when he wrote the letter we call 1st Thessalonians, a portion of which we heard as today's Epistle. The problem was that they hadn't been taught everything they needed to know. When Paul founded the congregation, he hadn't been able to stay very long with them. He had no sooner started preaching about Jesus in Thessalonica when a mob of his enemies from nearby Philippi showed up and began to stir up trouble. And they changed their tactics. In Philippi they'd gone after Paul and his fellow missionaries. They succeeded in having Paul and Silas publicly beaten and put in prison for while. But that didn't stop them from teaching the Good News. After their release from jail they just went to the next city to preach salvation in Jesus' name. So, in Thessalonica the bad guys decided that rather than go after Paul, in order to stifle the growth of the church they'd go after the new Christians instead. They had several of the new converts beaten and abused, and they threatened to do the same with the rest. So, to take the heat off of these new Christians, Paul withdrew from their city. He knew that his high profile as an evangelist was drawing the enemies of the Gospel like a lightning rod. He correctly figured that if he wasn't there, the persecution of the Christians in Thessalonica would diminish. So Paul moved on to Athens and from there to Corinth where he was able to stay for over a year in relative safety.

But that left the congregation in Thessalonica sort of like a half-baked cake. They had some of the basics down; but there were a lot of holes in their understanding of the Gospel and the other teachings of Christianity. And while there were some former Jews in the congregation who had a pretty good grasp on the Old Testament Scriptures, most of the members were converts from paganism with no background whatsoever in the Bible. They'd never been taught the Ten Commandments and other moral laws the Lord gave his people. Names like Noah,

Abraham, Moses, and David meant nothing to them. They were biblically illiterate. And it's hard to have a firm grasp on the Gospel if you don't know the essential stories of salvation: the background and context in which the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus takes place and needs to be understood.

To remedy this situation to some degree, Paul sent Timothy, his young "pastor in training" to the Thessalonians. Timothy didn't have Paul's fame as an evangelist, so it was less likely that the enemies of the church would take notice of his activities. But it was a less than optimum solution: rather like sending a high school student to teach a course in college Physics. Timothy could teach the fundamentals; but he would have been unable to handle a lot of the challenging theological questions that seekers and new converts often have.

And so, like I said, there were major gaps in the Thessalonians' understanding of the faith. For example, Paul had taught them that Christ was expected to return soon, and after that the faithful would inherit eternal life in his kingdom. So far, so good; but some of the Thessalonians didn't quite get it how it worked. They thought that their loved ones who came to faith in Christ but then died before his return were going to miss out on eternal life. They didn't understand that Jesus was going to raise the dead and bring with him all who had died in the faith. Others thought, well, if Jesus is coming back so soon, why should I bother to work? Why plant the fields or harvest the crops if Jesus is due back at any moment? I'd just be wasting all that effort. So they decided to take it easy and just sit around and wait for Jesus to appear. They didn't understand that just because Christ's return is imminent, that is, it could happen at any moment, it doesn't mean he's definitely going to show up tomorrow or within the next few weeks. It might be many years from the present (we know now more than 2000 of them). And these are just a few of the many misconceptions floating around among the members of the church at Thessalonica.

And this is why we hear Paul in today's Epistle expressing his eager desire to return to them in order to supply what was lacking in their faith. He wanted them to be more thoroughly grounded in the truths of Christ. He wanted their confession of the faith to be complete, and for the fruits of the Gospel that flows from a mature faith – the acts of love and of mercy that Christians ought to display – to be evident in their lives.

There are several reasons for this. The biggest by far is that Paul knew that half-baked, half-trained Christians are especially susceptible to falling. They are easily deceived by teachings that are presented by some as part of the Christian faith or at least consistent with it; but aren't. And Paul knew that many false teachers were out there. Wherever he went and started a new church, the deceivers spouting false doctrines soon showed up circling like buzzards just waiting for Paul to move on so that they could swoop down and begin feeding on the unwary. He didn't want to see it happen to the Thessalonians. Paul also knew that new Christians with misconceptions about the faith are easily disappointed and are subject to apostasy. Take those people who thought they didn't have to work because Jesus was due back so soon. After a few months, when their savings ran out and they didn't have any food, and Jesus still hadn't returned, they'd be thinking that they were lied to. The same thing happens in our day when new converts are taught by those who preach the "health and wealth gospel" that once they become Christians everything will come up roses for them. "No more illnesses, no more problems; God wants you to enjoy perfect health and live in a mansion and drive a fancy car." That's what they're told. And when it doesn't happen, they conclude that Christianity is a sham. It's even worse for them when they experience what Jesus told his followers they should expect: persecution, slander, hardship, the hatred of the world ... a cross to bear. To face life as a Christian as it actually is requires a much better footing in the faith.

And then there are all those other issues that have to do with our life together in the church. What is our worship supposed to look like? How are we to understand the Lord's Supper? Who should be allowed to partake of it? What does it mean to forgive as we have been forgiven and bear one another's burdens? How are we to help and encourage one another in our walks of faith? How am I to bear witness of Jesus to my family, friends, and neighbors? Where does my vocation fit into this as a husband or wife, as a worker or manager, or whatever my occupation happens to be? The answers to such questions don't come naturally; they need to be taught. And it's all part of what it means to be prepared – to be believing the things we're supposed to believe and doing the things we're supposed to be doing – as we wait in hopeful expectation for Christ's return.

Again, this is why Paul wanted so fervently to return to Thessalonica and see these new believers face to face. He knew there was a world of difference between writing this letter and actually being there in person to clear up their misconceptions and supply what was lacking in their faith. He wanted to worship the Lord Jesus with them, to declare Christ's forgiveness to them, to put into their mouths Christ's true body and blood, to teach them all they needed to know, to answer their questions, to pray with and for them, to counsel them according to God's Word in their individual situations, and to fellowship with them as joint members of the body of Christ. He wanted to do everything possible to ensure that they were in every way prepared to receive the Lord Jesus when he comes.

And, my friends, I want the same thing for you. It's not just my job. It's not just my calling. It's my prayer and heartfelt desire that just as Paul was able to return to Thessalonica and do the very things for them that he longed to do, so also the Lord will use me as his instrument to supply what is lacking in your faith, and to help prepare you so that your hearts may be established on Christ, and that you may be blameless in holiness at the coming of Jesus with all his saints.

Now, to be sure, this congregation isn't as new and immature as the one in Thessalonica to which Paul wrote; but that doesn't mean that we are as prepared for Christ's coming as we should or could be. I mean, let's take a quick poll here: raise your hand if you think you've already achieved full Christian maturity. You know the all the truths of the faith perfectly, you trust them completely, you never have any doubts or questions, you instantly recognize any false teaching you hear, you're 100% ready to face any trial or hardship without wavering, you forgive as you have been forgiven, you love others – even your enemies – as Christ has loved you; you've arrived. You're there. It's a wonder that Christ doesn't send a fiery chariot to collect you and take you to glory right away. Anyone?

I didn't think so. And to tell the truth, if someone had raised a hand, it would have been a strong indication that they weren't very mature in the faith. Only a fool thinks he has everything down pat and that his faith is strong and unshakable. Christian wisdom is revealed in knowing how weak we are, how little we know, and how this life is one of constant preparation and spiritual growth. As long as we have a sinful nature – and we will until we die or until Christ comes – then there's plenty of work for us to do. I can't tell you how many times I've found myself teaching from God's Word and someone will say, "You know, I've been a Christian for however many years, and I've never heard that, or leaned that, or understood that before." We all have more to learn, even the most seasoned of us. And I don't begin to imagine that I have it all down. I'm constantly discovering new faith building insights as I study and spend time with Christ in his holy Word, and as I listen to my teachers.

So, today we set the clock back and begin another Advent season. It's a new beginning: a time of repentance, a time for taking stock of how we stand in the faith, a time for making an honest assessment of our state of preparedness for Christ's coming, and perhaps even a time for making a few new church year's resolutions concerning the steps we can take to make sure we are better prepared. With St. Paul I give thanks to God for you, for all the joy that I have before God for your sake, and I pray most earnestly that face to face the Lord will continue to use my ministry to supply what is lacking in your faith in order that you will be well prepared, holy, and blameless before God our Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all his saints. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!