

*First Sunday in Advent*  
November 29, 2009  
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

*How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. (NIV)*

Today, we begin another church year. We do so with the start of advent which means “coming.” Is this the year? Is this the year Jesus will come? Will this be it for the long awaited return of our Savior? We do not know, do we? In fact, no one can know this except for God Himself because it is not for us to know. Instead, during this advent season, we are reminded to be watchful and prepared for Christ’s return.

There are many reminders about getting ready for the holidays, aren’t there? Advertisements will inform us time is running out, and we will hear countdowns on how many shopping days are left. The lights and music and weather are all relaying to us that Christmas is fast on its way. We are constantly told to be ready for the holidays, but since we don’t know how long we have until Jesus comes again perhaps we don’t have the same sense of urgency regarding Christ’s return. Yet, God tells us that our preparations for that return are far more significant. That’s why we are gathered here during this busy season to worship with one another. That’s why we will get away from all the hubbub for a little while on Sundays for some quiet time in God’s Word. That’s why we will focus a portion of our time in prayer this season. We want our hearts prepared for Jesus - to celebrate His first coming and to keep our eyes on the look out for His second coming.

These verses of God’s Word are a prayer about what is really important. This prayer reminds us that it is God and God alone who prepares us so that we are ready for the Lord’s return. May we not only read and meditate on this prayer, but may it become our own as we have: **A wonderful prayer for a new church year.**

There are two things for which the church in Thessalonica was well known. The first was severe persecution. Paul did not have much time with the believers here because after three weeks some bad characters chased Paul and his companions right out of this city. That’s also why the first chance Paul got he sent Timothy back to see how the church was doing. This letter is a response to Timothy’s good report. Timothy reported that the believers were not only holding up, they were zealous in mission work. That model mission work is the second thing for which this church became known. Paul hears about their faith and love despite all their distress and persecution. Paul is overjoyed. He sounds as if he is ready to do back flips. In the verse before this Paul says now he can really live because they are standing firm in the Lord.

So Paul offers up this wonderful prayer. He almost doesn't know what to say because he is so happy. ***"How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"*** This verse comes at a good time for us as we just had a day to give thanks. On our list of things I am not sure if we put this one on our thanksgiving list enough. Thank God for one another and especially for the God-given faith of one another. If you have children or parents or friends or any loved ones who know Jesus is the Savior thank God. For all your fellow Christians who endured another year of Satan's attacks to devour them thank God. For those who join you here in having a sure hope of eternal life thank God. How can we thank God enough for the faith in Jesus of all our loved ones and for God keeping them in the saving faith! Like Paul, may this fill us with great joy. What a wonderful thing to be thankful for as we begin a new church year!

Paul's prayer continues: ***"Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith. Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you."*** On a regular basis Paul prays for an opportunity to see them again. Paul had very little time with them because of the persecution. Paul wants to give them more instruction from God's Word. He asks that God the Father and their Lord Jesus might clear the way and direct all things to make this possible. But whether Paul could make it back to Thessalonica or not, Paul recognizes it is the Lord who will do the work to strengthen and keep them in the faith. Paul also prays: ***"May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you."*** Here we have a picture of these believers as a cup or container which is being filled. They are being filled with love - the love of Christ. Paul prays the Lord fills them so full that their love overflows - for each other - for everyone else.

Again what a wonderful prayer. Wouldn't that be a great thing to put onto our Christmas list? Ask God to supply what is lacking in our faith - to increase our knowledge of Him and what He has done for us. Ask God to do the same for others. Ask the Lord to fill us with His love so that it spills out of us. Pray that we love each other and everyone else with words and actions. Look for opportunities to show the love of Jesus to others this Christmas season.

And Paul concludes praying: ***"May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones."*** What a wonderful prayer for this new church year or any year! He asks that the Lord strengthen their hearts so that when Jesus comes again they will be ready. Paul wants them to stand in the presence of God and be found holy and blameless when Jesus returns with all the saints already in heaven.

How is that possible for anyone to stand holy and blameless when Jesus returns? All the prayers in the world can't make me blameless on my own. My children and other loved ones are far from holy. None of us are without sin. We are anything but blameless. In fact, doesn't this time of year sometimes bring out the worst in us. Maybe it is the cold or dark or the stress of deadlines or trying to get the tree set up straight with your wife, but we can get pretty downright ugly, can't we? Our words and actions are not always filled with love. We too easily focus and get frustrated on the little things or even the wrong things. We sin against others and against God.

How is it possible for sinners like us to stand holy and blameless before God? Because we do not stand in the presence of God on our own. Instead, we will stand holy because of what we read in our Old Testament lesson this morning. God has given all believers righteousness through the One called the Lord our Righteousness. We stand holy and blameless because of Jesus' first coming - because Jesus came as an obedient child to all God's laws. Jesus was holy and blameless. We stand holy and blameless because Jesus came humbly to pay our death sentence on the cross. Jesus love always spilled over for us so much so that he offered His life to pay for our sins. We stand holy and blameless because Jesus defeated sin and death and hell for us as He rose triumphant from His tomb. So now we stand triumphant over sin and death.

So Paul's prayer is that these people remain in the victory Jesus already won for them. That is our prayer too - for ourselves and for all our loved ones. There is nothing more important than being ready for Jesus. There is not anything more significant than to be prepared with a heart that believes that Jesus lived and died and rose for me so that I may stand holy and blameless in God's presence when Christ returns.

Many of you have probably heard the story about the children holding up the letters that spelled *Christmas Joy* where the child with the *m* held it upside down making it a *w* and spelling *Christ Was Joy*. There is nothing Satan would like more than to change and shorten that message even further into *Christ Was*. The devil wants the truth about Christmas to be a thing of the past. He wants to distract us from the true meaning of the season. The devil certainly doesn't want us to be expecting Jesus' return any time soon. He wants to devour the faith we have and the faith of our loved ones.

So join Paul in this wonderful prayer for the new church year. Ask the Lord to bless us and keep us and all our loved ones focused on what really matters this advent season. For Christ was - was born a man to save us from our sins. Christ is - here now with us to forgive us and strengthen us and protect us from all evil and cheer us with His love. Christ will be - coming again with all the saints in heaven - coming in glory with all His angels - coming with our redemption - coming to take you and me to be with Him forever. Perhaps this is the year. Whether it is or not may the Lord keep us holy and blameless through faith in Christ Jesus until that day arrives! Now that is a wonderful prayer! Amen.

