

Advent 1

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

December 1, 2024 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Don't Let Up as You Wait for Jesus to Come!

If a football team only plays for three quarters, or even relaxes during the 4th quarter, they will lose the game. As we enter the season of Advent, we are reminded that the game of life is coming to a close and much more is at stake than a football game. Eternal life hangs in the balance. We need to be careful that we do not let up as we wait for Jesus to come.

The church in the city of Thessalonica had a tough start. The Apostle Paul came to town and told them that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah who lived, died and rose for them. The Holy Spirit brought a number of people to faith. Alleluia! But then some jealous Jews forced Paul and his helpers to leave town after only three weeks. How do you think a three-week-old mission church would do without a pastor? Paul was obviously concerned about those believers who were new to the faith. He prayed for them constantly and was eager to see them again so he could teach them more. Paul sent his helper, Timothy, to check on them. Timothy returned and reported that in spite of persecution, they were standing firm in the faith. They did not let up. Paul was thrilled and wrote (:9), **“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?”** He wrote a letter to encourage them not to let up as they waited for Jesus to come.

He explained in verse 12, **“May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.”** The believers in that small mission church already loved each other, but they needed to keep nurturing that love. If you want to heat up the charcoal for your barbeque, you put all the briquettes in a pile because they heat each other. If the members of the church in Thessalonica did not lovingly encourage each other, Satan would divide them and snuff out their faith.

Our love for one another is a good measure of our faith. Just as the believers in Thessalonica loved one another, it is clear to me that you here at St. Matthew already love each other as brothers and sisters in the faith. I see this as you visit with each other before and after worship and express your concern for one another. I have often seen you help one another in many ways. You pray for one another and encourage each other

in different ways. It is great that you love one another. What a blessing it is to be part of a family of faith. Here you encourage each other to know that you are not the only one who believes in creation and salvation through the God-man, Jesus Christ. Here you encourage each other to hang on to Jesus when life gets tough. What a blessing!

It is also clear that our love for one another is far from perfect. I have heard members gossip and complain about each other. We are friendly to the people we know, but we rarely introduce ourselves to members we do not know. Many people leave worship, take 4 steps, and are out the door without talking with anyone. How can we nurture love between us if we don't talk to each other. A pastor friend of mind tells his people that Sunday morning is a 3-hour event – one for worship, one for Bible class and one for fellowship. I think there's a lot to be said for that. Do we ask ourselves, “That's a brother or sister in the Lord who is going to spend eternity with me. What can I do to help that person and encourage him/her?” It is so easy to let up in showing love to others. And even when we do loving things for others here at church or in our homes, we do not always have the right attitude. We can just go through the motions of doing what we are supposed to do without any love in heart. We can even complain about helping others and the Lord is not pleased with that. It happens. We're sinful.

Paul prayed that the **Lord** would increase the Thessalonians' love because they could not increase their love by themselves. And we can not increase our love by ourselves either. That would be like plugging a battery into itself to recharge it. It would not work. If we want to be more loving toward others, if we want to be more Christ-like, if we want to have a better attitude toward others and toward life, then we need to stay plugged into our power source – our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus showed that perfect love to us. He became flesh and lived among us for a while as he fellowshiped with us. He heated up our faith. Jesus lived a life of perfect love – always doing the right thing for the right reason, always taking time for everyone who needed help, never avoiding anyone. But Jesus did not live a perfect life just to give us a good example. That's what some churches teach. “Be more like Jesus. What would Jesus do?” Etc. That only reminds us of how imperfect we are. Think of this way: Imagine that Jesus received a trophy which had, “The Perfect Life” etched on it. He's the only one in the history of the world to win that trophy. But Jesus did use that trophy to boast or brag about how good he was. He came down to your level and gave that trophy to you.

He gave you his perfection. In our Old Testament lesson from Jeremiah, we heard that **“the LORD (referring to Jesus) is our righteousness.”** Jesus gives us his righteousness. Through Word and sacrament, he gives you the championship trophy over a sinful life. Then, Jesus offered his perfect life as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross to forgive all your sins. He is coming again to take you to heaven. As Jesus fills you again and again with his love, his love will fill up your life and overflow in expressions of love for one another. Do not let up as you wait for Jesus to come. Keep showing love more and more. Concentrate on. Work at it.

Paul continues with his concern that the Thessalonians stay strong in the faith and are ready for when Jesus returns to earth. He prayed (:13), **“May he [the Lord] strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy.”** Jesus made you blameless and holy through faith. But like little children who get clean in their bath, and then go outside and end up muddy all over again, we keep getting ourselves dirty with sin. The season of Advent is a time to examine our hearts. Just like we can get comfortable with a dirty house, we can get comfortable with a dirty heart. We can get comfortable not spending much time reading our Bibles or praying. We can get comfortable being selfish and holding grudges against others. If God gave us a little electric shock every time we sinned we would be constantly aware of our sinfulness. But since God does not instantly punish us, or poke us, or zap us for our sins, we can easily start thinking that our sins are not such a big deal, or that it’s OK for us to sin. It’s not OK. Every sin – even the ones that seem small and insignificant to us – is deadly serious. When you know that you are going to have visitors coming to your house for the holidays, you clean things up a bit more than normal. During Advent we are getting ready for Jesus to come and we want to make sure to clean up our hearts.

I know. We get tired. I get tired. We get weak from fighting a spiritual battle every day. Our sinful nature is constantly fighting to take control of our lives. We resist one temptation and the devil sends us two more. We strive to be kind and loving, but it gets difficult. Something goes wrong or someone says the wrong thing and anger quickly takes control and grabs control of our hearts. We leave church filled up with God’s grace and the resolve to live as the holy people of God that we are, but our day to day routine wears us out and we give into bad attitudes and mixed up priorities again and again. We let up in our faith life. It happens. We’re sinful.

We strengthen ourselves physically by eating a good healthy meal. We strengthen ourselves spiritually by eating the banquet of salvation Jesus provided for us. The good news of salvation that we get through Word and Sacrament is the protein, vitamins and vegetables we need to be spiritually strong. During this Advent season, there are special opportunities to feast on God’s goodness and grow spiritually stronger. In addition to our normal Sunday worship, we have services for the next three Wednesday nights. If you have not been coming to our mid-week Advent services, then honestly ask yourselves why not. I know, and so does God, that some of you honestly can not make it. But if you can make it and, instead, you just sit on your couch watching reruns, don’t you think it would be better to come and spend time with Jesus – to show him what he means to you as you receive his blessing? There are also special Advent devotions booklets for you. Spending time with Jesus and his Word is the best way to get ready for Christmas. It’s even more important than having beautiful decorations and wonderful presents.

God promises to strengthen your hearts so that you can stand firm against the devil and all his evil attacks, so that you can resist temptations and live a pure life, so that you can prepare your hearts for the coming of Jesus. Then, as St. Paul says (:13), **“You will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”** The holy ones are the believers who are already in heaven and waiting to see us again. Won’t that be awesome! We are eager for heaven. Just as the crowd on Palm Sunday shouted with joy as Jesus rode into Jerusalem, we rejoice that Jesus is coming to us. We will turn away from sin. We will show loving kindness to one another. We will cling to Christ no matter. We will not let up in our faith life as we wait for Jesus to come and take us home. Amen.