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Homiletical Studies

THE FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

December 1, 1985

Paul does two things at once. He thanks God for the Thessalonians and offers petitions to God on their behalf. Paul's thanks are due to the news from Timothy that the Thessalonian Christians are continuing in faith and love (3:6). Paul makes these petitions because he has spent only a short time in Thessalonica and wants to complete what is lacking in the faith of his friends. Furthermore, his efforts have been cut short by persecutors of the faith (2:14-16), and so he is uncertain as to the Thessalonians' spiritual health. Paul uses the word "tribulation" to describe his present woes as he, torn from the Thessalonians, waits alone and impatiently while Timothy travels north to ascertain the Thessalonian situation. The tribulation, then, is not merely some future trouble for the church, but present difficulties faced by Paul and by all Christians. Christians today need to see the Biblical response to tribulations as God's message of hope in their often difficult Christian lives. God's answer to the tribulation is twofold. First, ultimately He will deliver us by the parousia (coming or appearing) of our Lord Jesus. Second, in the meantime He comforts, strengthens, and prepares us today with the ministry of the apostolic Word. Since no one knows the day of the parousia (5:2), Paul is more anxious to prepare and strengthen his people than to discern any divine secrets. Knowing the health of the Thessalonians' faith Paul's petitions for them are really more of a blessing or benediction than pious wishful thinking. His words also provide us an excellent summary both of what Paul's ministry was to accomplish and what the ministry of the apostolic Word can accomplish today, especially in terms of preparing for the coming of the Lord.

Introduction: Thanksgiving and Christmas are times when we either visit loved ones or are visited by them. Thanksgiving was just three days ago and perhaps visitors may still be in the worship service this morning. In our visits we tend to talk about sports, food, family, church, and almost anything under the sun. Paul wanted to visit his friends and talk about something more important and to prepare them for an even more important visit. He wanted to talk about Jesus Christ and prepare the people for Christ's coming. When we listen to Paul's words, not only shall we know how to be prepared, but listening will prepare us.

When Christians Listen to God They Become Prepared for Christ

- I. When Christians listen to God, their faith is completed.
 - A. The content of our faith (what we believe) grows through hearing the Word.
 1. For example, one may know Jesus as his Savior but be confused about His Supper. Listening will help.
 2. For example, one may know God's love but not be certain of the events surrounding the second coming. Listening will help.
 - B. The more information from the Bible we have the stronger we will be.
 1. Since we are so sinful and blind by nature.
 2. Especially since, as Christians, we suffer tribulation.
 3. Since so many false teachings are confronting us.

Not only does God's Word give us information about Christ, but

II. When Christians listen to God, they increase in love.

A. God in Christ causes us to love.

B. Especially, we love other Christians.

1. Since we are one with them.

2. Not just in attitude but through actions.

C. We also love all people.

1. As a witness.

2. Since we are constrained.

D. Paul is a good example of this love.

1. He sacrificed himself for his people.

2. He gave himself to serve others.

The Word causes us to love others only because it has powerfully saved us, for

III. When Christians hear the Word of God, their hearts are established.

A. Established to live blameless lives (cf. Php 2:15).

1. "Blameless" describes our conduct.

2. Even this blamelessness comes from Christ.

B. Established in a state of holiness.

1. This state is Christ's gracious doing.

2. This state of holiness is not a gradual accomplishment.

3. This state of holiness is the cause of blamelessness and not its effect.

C. Prepared to stand at the coming of Christ.

Conclusion: Hearing God's Word prepares us because our faith is completed by it, our love is increased by it, our hearts are established by it. We prepare for any visitor on holidays and special occasions. Since Christ is coming at any time, we must be prepared at any time. We prepare ourselves in the same way as the Thessalonians almost two thousand years ago—by hearing the message of Christ.

Klemet Preus

Grand Forks, North Dakota

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Philippians 1:3-11

December 8, 1985

As in the Epistle for the First Sunday in Advent, in this text Paul deals with the topic of sanctification in the wider sense. He is not so much concerned with our specific good works as he is with God's working in us. Paul again is thanking God for fellow Christians. His prayer for them offers a description of the sanctified Christian. The prayer, while begun in verse 4, is not expressed until verse 9. Verses 5-8 are the basis for his prayer. Verses 5-7 talk of the Philippians' condition. Verses 9-11 talk of the natural expression of this gracious condition. Both sections commence with an expression of Paul's affection (vs 3-4, 8), and both sections refer to the "day of Christ Jesus." Incidentally, the expression "fellowship" in the Gospel (v 5) seems most naturally understood as a close equivalent to "common faith" or the "fellowship of grace" in verse 7. Some commentators take the expression to mean a monetary gift or sharing in mission work. While these activities would spring from "fellowship" in the Gospel, such a definition tends unnecessarily to narrow the term.

Introduction: Today the world is full of gloom and doom preachers and all sorts of bizarre claims about the end times. People often are more concerned about deter-

mining the impossible than preparing for the inevitable. The beauty of Christianity is that it is a religion not of conjecture but of comfort. The Word gives us confidence not only that Christ will come but that God has prepared and continues to prepare us for this coming. So a Christian is not just someone who anticipates and waits for Christ but one who is ready and prepared for Him.

God Prepares Us for the Day of Christ

- I. God prepares us for the day of Christ by giving us the Gospel.
 - A. God alone is responsible for the creation of my faith.
 1. I am too sinful to create faith or cooperate with God.
 2. The idea of grace excludes my efforts.
 3. This creation is through the Gospel.
 - B. God also preserves and perfects my faith.
 1. He does so by the Gospel.
 2. He does so alone.
 - C. God's work in me enables me to stand confidently on the last day.
 1. Since I am standing in Christ.
 2. Since my standing depends not on me but on God's grace.

While God prepares us for the day of Christ by the giving of the Gospel, this Gospel also produces something in us.

- II. God prepares us for the day of Christ by bringing forth fruits in us.
 - A. These fruits spring from our righteousness in Christ.
 1. They have value because we are in Christ.
 2. And so by them God is glorified.
 - B. These fruits are produced gradually.
 1. As we grow in our relationship to Christ (knowledge).
 2. As we grow in our moral experience (insight).
 - C. These works done in us will stand when Christ comes.
 1. These works will be pointed out publicly (Matthew 25:34ff).
 2. But our sins, being forgiven, will not be mentioned.

Conclusion: God prepares us for the day of Christ (1) by giving us the Gospel and faith which gives us our standing before Him and (2) by bringing forth fruits in us which will be publicly praised as glorifying God when he comes. Why should we get distraught and disquieted over all the confusing and silly theories about Christ's coming? Let us look to the Gospel instead. Thereby we are prepared, perfected, and made ready. This way is far better.

Klemet Preus

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Philippians 4:4-9

December 15, 1985

The theme of Advent takes a different shape this Sunday and the lessons assist in this shift of mood. The strong tone of judgment, characteristic of the first two Sundays of Advent, now makes room for a burst of joy and the "peace of God which passes all understanding" (Php 4:7). The Epistle from Philippians is the old introit for this Sunday and serves to bind together the three lessons around the theme "Re-

joice!," a most appropriate choice for this "Gaudete" Sunday. For the theme of joy is a dominant one in Philippians (1:4,18,25;2:2,17,18,28,29;3:1; 4:1,4,10) and is always juxtaposed with suffering, for the Christian lifestyle is always characterized in Philippians as joy in the midst of suffering. In his captivity Paul is preoccupied with communicating to the Philippian community that his sufferings for Christ are not a negation of the Gospel but an affirmation of his authenticity as an apostle of Christ.

Thus, the theme of joy in the midst of suffering dominates this epistle from beginning to end, giving it an eschatological flavor that reaches a climax in this pericope. Joy is the stance of the Christian in the midst of suffering because the parousia is near. By prayer and supplication the Christian may petition God to ease the anxiety of a life lived out in imitation of Christ so that, through forbearance, he may have the peace of Christ. These are lofty goals for the Philippians and for our communities. But every Christian community receives them as part of the apostolic tradition that is handed down generation after generation through the Word: "what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me" (v 8). Paul sets himself up as a model of joy in the midst of persecution, but calls all Christians to imitate Christ in the qualities of His life and His attitude in suffering. So the Philippians are encouraged to have the same mind of Christ as portrayed in the great hymn of Christ's humiliation and exaltation (Php 2:6-11). Most commentators take verse 8 of our pericope as a list of Hellenistic virtues, but they are more likely the attributes of Jesus Christ, the perfect gift from above. These are the same kind of attributes that are used to describe Christ and the Christian in the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-12).

For the suffering church that is anxiously preparing for the celebration of the incarnation, where the Savior is born in a manger in Bethlehem, these are sumptuous themes upon which to dine on this third Sunday in Advent. Our anxiety over life in a broken universe gives way to joy inside our tears. And so what we truly anticipate and what we actually prepare for is the inbreaking of God's peace in the Christ child, a peace which passes all understanding. The paradox is that joyful tears yield lives of peace with God. Zephaniah announces the joy and demonstrates God's presence in our midst, while Luke shows us how the Holy Spirit helps us prepare by cleansing the way and anticipating the consummation of all things.

The mood of this pericope is the imperative to live in the theology of the cross. Consider the following internal structure of this pericope (imperatives italicized):

- (4) *Rejoice* in the Lord always . . . *Rejoice!*
- (5) *Make known* your forbearance before men.
- (6) *Do not be anxious.*
- (7) *Make known* your petitions before God.
And the peace of God will keep . . .
- (8) *Consider* these things . . .
- (9) *Do* what things you learned, you received, you heard, and you saw.
And the God of peace will be with you.

With this internal structure in mind the following outline recognizes the theme of the Third Sunday in Advent and the overall theme of Philippians that finds its climax in this pericope.

Joy Inside Our Tears

- I. For joyful tears make known our forbearance before men (v 5).
A. Forbearance that recognizes that the Lord is near (v 5).

- B. Forbearance that petitions God (v 6).
 - 1. By prayer and supplication.
 - 2. With thanksgiving.
- C. Forbearance that keeps our hearts and minds in the peace of God (v 7).
- II. For joyful tears show our imitation of Christ.
 - A. Imitation of His Christlike qualities (v 8).
 - 1. Received in Baptism when we become "Christ's."
 - 2. Detailed in the beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5).
 - B. Imitation of His suffering for the Kingdom (Php 3:10).
 - 1. Suffering in our fight against opponents of the Gospel (Php 1:27-30).
 - 2. Suffering with the same mind of Christ detailed in the incarnational poem of Philippians 2:6-11.
 - C. Imitation of the apostolic tradition that assures us that the God of peace will be with us (v 9).
 - 1. By recounting what we have learned, received, heard, and seen from the apostles (v 9).
 - 2. By proclaiming the incarnate Word whose birth we celebrate at Christmas time.
 - 3. By celebrating God's peace in the Eucharist.

Arthur Just

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Hebrews 10:5-10

December 22, 1985

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, the church now hunkers down and focuses on the essence of the holy season. The theme of this Sunday is christological. There is a conscious attempt in our lessons to see God's incarnational purpose riveted in the crucified body of the Messiah. Micah announces the ancestry of the Son of David born in Bethlehem; Mary proclaims that the child in her womb is the Messiah-Christ; and the author of Hebrews uses Psalm 40 as the means for declaring that the incarnate Lord is the one to be offered up upon the cross as the final sacrifice for the world's sins.

Thus, this last Sunday before the Nativity of our Lord is dominated by a theme that inextricably binds together the incarnation and the atonement. As we stand on the holy ground of Christmas, this is a fine theme for us to consider. And the Epistle from Hebrews is a marvelous vehicle by which to proclaim this message. Our pericope immediately precedes the climax of the Epistle to the Hebrews in 10:11-18, where Christ is proclaimed as the exalted High Priest. But today's lesson is seminal in understanding this Epistle, for it brings forth the basic understanding that, in Christ, the old becomes new, that "He [Christ] takes away the first in order to establish the second" (v 9). He does so by making a sacrifice of Himself, once-for-all. The distance between the atonement and Christmas is only temporal, for when the child is born in Bethlehem, His death is already seen as the climax of His incarnation.

It is fair to say, therefore, that Jesus Christ is born to die. And it is also fair to say that with the birth of Jesus Christ, the old becomes new, the old covenant of sacrificial offerings giving way to the new covenant of the once-for-all sacrifice of God's Son for the sins of the world. The author of Hebrews sees in Psalm 40 a pro-

phetic statement in which the Messiah is seen as doing "the will of God" by His self-sacrifice. For the people of God who gather to celebrate the incarnation and the atonement on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, their eyes should be focused on the sanctifying power of Christ's offering that cleanses them from all their sin. For it is here that God's people are declared holy; it is here that they are set apart as the body of Christ; it is here that they see themselves as new creatures in the new creation. With the shift from old to new, there is a power unleashed, a spiritual power, that rocks the universe. One does not usually associate power with Christmas, but if this season is what our Epistle says it is, then there is a power breaking into the world that changes the world forever. One cannot preach in this holy season of our Lord's birth without recognizing that the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are power-laden events.

As one considers the following outline, an introduction might discuss how God cloaks His power in humble images—it is the sleepy village of Bethlehem, not Rome, where the Savior is born; it is shepherds, not Pharisees, who come to worship the child; it is a manger, not a palace, where the birth takes place. How strange for our God to use His power, not for the glory of man, but for the saving of man. God's powerful kingdom comes through abject humility, for in humility and weakness God's power is released, an understanding that unlocks the mystery of the incarnation and the atonement. Christmas is the season of power because of the reason for the birth of the child—Jesus Christ was

Born to Die

- I. A death that abolishes the sacrificial cult.
 - A. The old covenant sacrifices are not desired (v 5).
 1. They were to be a reminder of Christ's atonement (He 10:3).
 2. The blood of bulls and goats do not take away sin (He 10:4).
 - B. The old covenant of the law is a shadow of things to come (He 10:1).
 1. In Christ, the law is fulfilled, as is written in the roll of the book (v 7).
 2. In Christ, the will of God is fulfilled, as is written in the roll of the book (v 7).
- II. A death that is an offering up of Himself.
 - A. The body of Christ has been prepared in the new covenant (v 5).
 1. The atonement reveals the mystery of the incarnation (v 5).
 2. The atonement unleashes the power of a new age.
 - B. The body of Christ (the church) has been sanctified through the offering of the body of Christ once-for-all (v 10).
 1. To be sanctified is to be part of the new creation.
 2. To be sanctified involves participation in the death of Christ.
 - a. By remembering in our Baptism that we die and rise with Christ.
 - b. By partaking of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist.

Arthur Just

CHRISTMAS DAY**Titus 3:4-7****December 25, 1985**

Titus was a Gentile, a companion of St. Paul. The apostle, after a brief stint of service on the island of Crete, left Titus in charge. It was his task and ministry to bring stability to newborn Christians and infant churches there. The writing of the letter falls around 63 A.D. while Paul may have been in Macedonia. Titus 3:4-7, the Christmas Day Epistle, is a profound statement of grace by St. Paul. It was God's *philanthropia* (love for mankind) which prompted Him to send the gift of His Son into the world at the nativity of our Lord. Paul defines grace simply by stating that God's love is given to man, not because he was deserving of such love, but rather as a free gift.

The power of God's grace in Christ is brought to us by the "washing of regeneration," which clearly refers to baptism and not to an outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost. While Paul does not mention the part that faith plays in this drama where God is clearly the actor and initiator of His love, it is implied when he says that those who are recipients of God's grace in Christ are made heirs, the inheritors of eternal life. It is in faith that man appropriates God's gift of grace and makes its blessings his own now and into eternity.

Introduction: I have before you a nicely wrapped present and on the box it says, "Open at Christmas." I wonder what it might be? A special gift for the pastor? A sum of money for the church to pay the mortgage or to buy a new organ? Well, we shall never know what is in this gaily wrapped box unless we open it. So let us open the gift! There, it is open, but all that is inside is a slip of paper. What does it say? "A gift to the congregation—the gift of My grace in Jesus Christ." Signed: "God the Father." Amidst all the gifts that you have received this Christmas, I trust you will treasure this gift above all others, the gift of God's love and grace in Jesus Christ. This Christmas:

Let Us Open the Gift of God's Grace

As we do, we shall find.

- I. The Savior of the world (v 4).
 - A. He is presented to us out of love.
 - B. We are undeserving of such love (v 5).
- II. The gracious act of baptism (vs 5,6).
 - A. Baptism regenerates and saves by grace.
 - B. The Holy Spirit is poured into our lives through baptism.
- III. The assurance of an eternal inheritance (v 7).
 - A. In faith we make the blessings of grace our own.
 - B. In faith we lay hold of eternal life as God's heirs.

Conclusion: There are some gifts which are treasured for a lifetime because of the sentiment behind the gift. The greatest gift-giver is God. There is deep sentiment behind His most precious Christmas gift—the gift of His grace in Christ Jesus. Shall we treasure this gift or despise and cast it aside as we do the wrappings from a gift we have received? Not only would God have you open His gift, but He would have you receive it in faith and treasure it to all eternity.

Edmond E. Aho
Yuma, Arizona

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Hebrews 2:10-18

December 29, 1985

The authorship of the letter to the Hebrews remains a moot point. Was it Paul, with his burden for his "brethren"? Was it Barnabas the Levite, the companion of Paul, to whom Tertullian of Carthage credited the authorship? Was Hebrews, as Luther argued, the product of several authors? Regardless, it is a profound letter written before the end of the first century to direct Hebrew Christians to the roots of their faith in the Old Testament, to urge them not to "cave in" as they faced persecution and arguments from their fellow Jews, and to point them to Christ, the "Seed of Abraham," the Messiah sent from God. (The Jewish faith was an accepted religion of the Roman realm, but Christianity was considered a sect.)

Hebrews is essentially a Christological epistle. It reveals how Christ has, in all things, fulfilled God's plan of the ages and is Savior of Jew and Gentile alike, for they are true children of Abraham who, like this father of believers, have faith in God's Messiah. Thus, this text for the Sunday after Christmas, which is traditionally a low day for pastors and parishes after the enthusiasm and excitement of Christmas, fairly bursts with a joyful proclamation of Christ, the flower that has bloomed in the midst of winter to reveal the beauty of God's plan of victory and salvation for all people.

Introduction: In a hauntingly beautiful Christmas song by Pietro Yon we hear these words:

When blossoms flowered 'mid the snow
Upon a winter night,
Was born the child, the Christmas Rose,
The King of love and light.

Again the heart with rapture glows
To greet the holy night
That gave the world its Christmas Rose
Its King of love and light.

Let every voice acclaim His name,
The grateful chorus swell.
From paradise to earth He came
That we with Him might dwell

If the simple beauty of our Christmas celebration tells us anything, it surely tells us this:

A Rose Has Burst Forth in Splendor

Christ is that Rose:

- I. He has burst forth in His Nativity.
 - A. He has become our brother, our Immanuel (vs 11, 14, 16, 17).
 - B. He has become our brother to fulfill God's purpose (vs 10, 18).
- II. He has burst forth that He might suffer.
 - A. God's justice and mercy have kissed each other (Ps 85:10).

B. His beauty is meant to be shared by all mankind (vs 10, 12, 13, 16, 17; Ps 22:22; Is 8:17, 18)

III. He has burst forth that He might conquer.

A. Suffering without victory is hopeless (vs 10, 17).

B. Christ, through suffering, has overcome the devil (v 4).

C. In Him we become more than conquerors (v 18).

Conclusion: In many areas of the country and our world, living now in the depths of winter solstice, to find a rose in bloom would be most unusual. But there are places in our country and the world where roses are indeed in full bloom. In any case, important thing is to find the Rose whose stem goes back through the ages to David, to Abraham, to Noah, to Adam, to God. It is none other than God's own Christmas Rose, the Rose that burst forth in splendor on the first Christmas.

Edmond E. Aho

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-18

January 5, 1986

In order that Christians might fulfill the purpose in this life which God intended (to live to the praise of His glory, vs 6, 12) the Apostle Paul reminds the Ephesians (and us) that reasons for praising God reach back much further than Jesus' coming to earth on the first Christmas. God's love and grace toward us were evident "before the foundation of the world" (v 4) was laid.

The Church Is Born

- I. The church was born in the mind and will of God before creation.
 - A. God chose us to be His long ago.
 1. He would not endure the estrangement of the crown of His creation caused by sin.
 2. God's choice was prompted by His great love and undeserved kindness toward us (v 6).
 3. God's choice was meant to stir us to praise.
 - B. God carried out in time what He chose to do in eternity.
- II. Jesus' birth is the key to the birth of the church.
 - A. Through Jesus we are made holy and blameless (v 4).
 1. We receive the benefit of Jesus' righteousness by faith. In God's eyes we are righteous.
 2. This righteousness Jesus earned for us by His holy life.
 3. This righteousness frees us from the guilt of sin. To feel guilt when we have been freed of it is unnecessary and an insult to the grace of God and the Savior who freed us.
 - B. Jesus in His suffering and death endured the punishment for our sin.
 1. Through faith we are free of the punishment of our sin.
 2. We need not live in fear of this punishment.
 3. God means for us to serve Him and praise Him.
 - C. Through Jesus and the working of the Holy Spirit we become God's sons (v 5).

III. Faith-filled Christians are evidence that the church is alive (v 15).

A. Faith shows itself in love.

1. Faith shows itself in the love of God.
2. Faith shows itself in the love of one's fellowmen.

B. Faith shows itself enlightening the eyes of the heart (v 18).

1. To know God and Jesus Christ.
2. To know a glorious hope for this life and for heavenly life.
3. To talk to God in prayer, thus maintaining the relationship.

Conclusion: Reflect on these blessings from God and praise Him always!

Rudolph A. Haak
Cambridge, Minnesota

THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Acts 10:34-38

January 12, 1986

The great marvel of Christmas is that God became man. The great marvel of Epiphany is that this man is also true God. Being both true God and true man, He is the Savior of all men. For the Jew of the early Church this truth was a tremendous challenge to faith. Even the Apostle Peter, after being filled with the Holy Ghost (on Pentecost), could believe this truth only by virtue of a special vision from God (vv 9-16).

In the book of Acts Cornelius is the third Gentile to become a member of the household of faith (cf. the Ethiopian eunuch, 8:27; Nicolaus the proselyte, 6:5). In this special outreach of the Lord He teaches us again in a very special way that

The Good News of Peace Is for All People

I. Jesus is the center of the Good News of peace.

A. Jesus is "Good News" only to those who recognize the rupture caused by sin between man and God.

1. Many who feel the guilt of sin do not understand its consequences, namely, God's just anger and our eternal separation from Him.
2. Every person, of every land, in every condition of life is affected by sin. The consequences in this life and in eternity are dreadful unless one is rescued from them by God through the "Good News."

B. The Good News is Jesus Christ.

1. He has delivered every person from the guilt, punishment, and slavery of sin by His life, death, and resurrection.
2. In Him is life, new life now and life in eternity.

II. The Good News is meant to be delivered in person.

A. The Good News of peace once came to Cornelius in a vision, but being a "devout man," he had, no doubt, already read the Old Testament Scriptures.

1. The Good News comes to us in Holy Scripture. We contemplate the written word and are blessed when we use it.
2. We send the written word all over the world in Bibles, tracts, and periodicals. The Spirit attends its use and brings blessings through it.

B. God intends that His people "go" to proclaim, to teach, and to baptize.

1. God Himself not only proclaimed His news through the writings of the Old Testament, but in the fulness of time He also sent His Son. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).

2. Peter rose and went and talked to Cornelius (v 23). Cornelius needed the witness of Peter.
3. The Lord tells us, "Go!" (Mt 28:19; Mk 16:15). To tell about peace and reconciliation between sinful man and His God is good. God will bless the hearers of the news with faith. The "Good News" is best proclaimed when the message comes from a person who is reconciled to God and whose countenance beams with the peace which only God can give.

Conclusion: Go therefore to every person who has not yet heard, and to all who have. Go therefore to every person who is a sinner. Go therefore to every person for whom the Savior lived, died, and rose from the grave. Go therefore to every person whom God would reach, that none for whom he gave His Son may be lost.

Rudolph A. Haak

THE SECOND SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

January 19, 1986

1 Corinthians 12 is set within the greater context of Paul's instruction to the Corinthians concerning spiritual gifts (12-14): Why were these gifts given? How are they bestowed? How were they to be used? The Corinthians were apparently impressed with the more visible *charismata* and were selfishly seeking after these gifts. (This is exactly what Paul is saying in verse 31 if the verb *zeloute* is taken as indicative instead of imperative, as all the translations have it. The context would argue for the use of the indicative.)

But God is not a God of chaos and discord, allowing His precious gifts to be dispensed randomly according to our selfish whims or by virtue of the earnestness of our seeking. The individual is stressed in these verses. Each Christian is given a gift or gifts. The "one God" gives to each a gift through His Spirit, and it is the same Spirit who dispenses varieties of gifts. Our duty as Christians, then, is not to seek after gifts but to recognize and rejoice in our God-given spiritual gifts. A sermon based on the outline below would seek to instill in Christians the sense of honor implicit in their own individual spiritual gifts, knowing those gifts are determined, custom-made, and built within them by God.

Introduction: We admire gifted people. Those with intelligence, good looks, or impressive skills usually control the inside track on popularity and success. Gifted people also exist within God's church. And here also we might be tempted to think that some are thereby more favored than others. But St. Paul tells us that we are all special to God; we are all holders of this title:

The Gifted Christian

- I. Spiritual gifts come from God.
 - A. The same Spirit that calls us to faith in Jesus bestows upon us "varieties of gifts" (vs 3-4).
 1. By virtue of our faith we "are not lacking in any *charismata*" (1 Cor 1:7).
 2. God sees to it that there are sufficient gifts for His church in any given place.

- B. We are just the way God wants us to be.
 - 1. We are endowed with the gifts "He wills for us" (v 11).
 - 2. To seek jealously after other gifts is not only unnecessary; it calls into question God's unique ordinance for our place in His kingdom.
 - II. Spiritual gifts are "for the common good" (v 7).
 - A. In diversity there is unity.
 - 1. God coordinates and compliments the gifts in His church.
 - 2. Every gift and, therefore, every individual is important if the common good of God's kingdom is to be achieved.
 - B. It is necessary, then, that we recognize our individual gifts and use them (A description of the gifts in verses 8-10, or other gifts listed elsewhere in Scripture, as they apply to the specific congregation may be given.)
- Conclusion:* How important we all are to God! He not only calls us by name to confess His name in faith; He also honors each of us further with special and vitally important gifts. Truly, we are "gifted Christians."

Paul E. Cloeter
Kimball, Minnesota

THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

1 Corinthians 12:12-21, 26-27

January 26, 1986

Whereas the emphasis in 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 is on the individual and the diversity of spiritual gifts which God bestows on "each one" (vs 7,11), our text, which incorporates essentially the remainder of chapter 12, is Paul's instruction concerning the unity of these varied individual gifts in the body of Christ. This body, the church in its broadest sense, is to be a well-organized and smooth-running operation. Paul illustrates this by the analogy of the human body. Individual members are to use their divinely ordained and bestowed gifts so that the body may function as intended.

Like the Corinthians, many Christians within the church today are individualists who (1) want to work independently and, thereby, often counter-productively in the church; (2) try to be or acquire in terms of spiritual gifts what God never intended them to have; (3) look down on others with less dramatic gifts; (4) feel inferior or even worthless because their gifts are less "showy" or contribute in a less apparent way than others. The goal of the sermon outlined below is to remind Christians that our spiritual gifts, no matter what they may be, are valuable. But they find value only as they are put to use in concert with the whole body of Christ.

Introduction: When it comes to joining together with others in accomplishing a goal, it seems everybody wants to be, or dreams about being, the proverbial quarterback. We like the glory of being able to stand out. But as any employer or coach will tell you, it is the multitude of people doing their tasks well behind the scenes that makes success possible. St. Paul employs the same principle in our life together in the church. He motivates us to success in our text with

Body Language

- I. Christ is the body.
 - A. Through His body, Christ has reconciled us.
 - 1. He has reconciled us first to God.
 - 2. He has reconciled us also to one another as we "drink of the one Spirit" (v 13).

- B. We, though many and diverse, find identity and unity only in His body.
 - 1. We were baptized into Him by the one Spirit (v 13).
 - 2. Through this action we have become one with Christ. (Compare John 17:21, Romans 6, and other Pauline references to the mystical union of believers "in Christ.")
- II. We are the individual members.
 - A. Each has unique gifts and intended functions.
 - 1. These gifts are determined by God (v 18).
 - 2. There is no room in the body, therefore, for criticism, envy, or feelings of inferiority and uselessness (vs 15-17,21).
 - B. We have a vested interest in each other.
 - 1. We care about each other. The pain and suffering of one member affects us all adversely. Likewise, the honor of one member makes all members feel good (v 26).
 - 2. Working together, the body functions and accomplishes its goal.

Conclusion: In the heat of the Revolutionary War, Benjamin Franklin is credited with saying, "We all better hang together, or we'll all hang separately." By virtue of our calling as Christians, we form an important part in the overall working of Christ's church. The body of Christ is no place for individualists. By hanging together and exercising our gifts to the fullest, the body flourishes, to the honor of its members and to the glory of Christ.

Paul E. Cloeter

THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

1 Corinthians 12:27-13:13

February 2, 1986

The manner in which this text has been sentimentalized and even trivialized by careless readers of it is well-known. Genuine love is an easily misunderstood concept. Letting the Word speak in its proper context is the means of illuminating the profound truth that Paul is seeking to teach.

Clearly love is a "still more excellent way" (v 31). All spiritual gifts have a purpose, but genuine love (*agape*) binds them all together. Its value is understood by the repeated use of conditionals ("if") in the early verses of chapter 13. The frequent employment of the negative ("not") in verses 4-7 proves that love is not easily defined by human language, which can often describe only that something is not, instead of what it truly is. Love in truth is the premier divine quality which gives significance to every other valued Christian gift, including faith and hope (v 13). The goal of the sermon is to lead the hearers to begin to understand the surprising value of love as God bestows it and they practice it. The problem is that we have a tendency to emotionalize love, which makes it subject to our unreliable feelings. The means to the goal is the carefully considered understanding of the fullness of love and how we love because He first loved us.

Introduction: The words of this "Love Chapter" are both amazing and surprising, worthy of more than an inscription on a wall plaque or a reading at a wedding. Love is part of the very nature of God and the enduring quality which is most to typify His people. If we by the Spirit's guiding truly let Him speak to us in this text, we will learn of

The Suprising Value of Love

- I. It gives meaning to the Christian life.
 - A. No spiritual gift has any purpose without love (vs 1,2).
 1. The ability to speak in tongues is a useless gift without love.
 2. The gifts of prophecy and understanding have no point without love.
 - B. No heroic act of service does any good without love (v 7).
 1. Giving away everything, as commendable as it may seem, accomplishes nothing without love.
 2. Surrendering one's self in martyrdom does not mean anything without love.
- II. It gives definition to the Christian faith.
 - A. Believing in Jesus has no lasting value without love (v 2).
 - B. Believing in Jesus is defined in a visible, dramatic way by Christians who love as the Savior loved.
- III. It gives completion to the Christian hope.
 - A. Spiritual maturity increases as genuine love increases and leads to hope for the life to come (vs 9-12).
 1. In love we grow in confidence.
 2. In love we "see" more clearly (v 12).
 - B. Full understanding based on abiding love is our sure hope that will not disappoint us.

Conclusion: Perhaps it seems surprising that Paul would "rank" love above the essential qualities of faith and hope. Yet the value of love is always surprising as it lends meaning to the Christian life, faith, and hope. It is the "tie that binds," the divine quality that lasts forever.

David E. Seybold
Fredonia, Wisconsin

THE LAST SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

2 Corinthians 4:3-6

February 9, 1986

It is sometimes difficult for Christians to understand how unbelievers can persistently reject a faith which to the believer is so valuable and sensible. Paul touches on this subject in this text, honestly observing that the Gospel is veiled to those who are perishing. What he calls "the god of this world" (v 4) has blinded their minds. Grammatically and theologically this phrase can properly be translated, "the god which is this world," reflecting what we believers know too well, namely that worldliness can be totally distracting as it devours the attention of far too many people.

The goal of the sermon is to emphasize the value of Christian faith and the way that it makes excellent sense to those who have it. The problem is that the people of the world have been blinded by the world and accordingly try to convince Christians that faith is quite foolish. The means to the goal is the sharing of the Gospel, which is the power of God to lift the veil (v 3) and shine forth as the "light of the knowledge of the glory of God" (v 6).

Introduction: An ancient saying affirms that "concerning taste there is no disputing." Some people prefer red; others like blue. There is no sense arguing about personal preference. Yet unbelievers sometimes like to give the impression that Christians who "prefer" faith over unbelief have chosen a foolish and senseless belief. They cannot see any possible value in Christian faith and are unafraid to dispute what seems so proper for Christians. Do they have a point? Perhaps we ought to ask

Just What Do You See in Christianity?

- I. It is a message veiled to the perishing.
 - A. The god which this world offers only distractions because it cannot offer any "light" (v 4).
 1. It can succeed only when it keeps people preoccupied and blind to their sin.
 2. It can succeed only by turning the view of people in upon themselves.
 - B. The god which is this world seems sensible to the perishing because they know nothing else.
- II. It is a message valued by the believing.
 - A. The true and only God brings light to sin-darkened minds (v 6).
 1. His people can then see the wickedness of themselves and the world.
 2. His people can then see the value of trusting in the Savior.
 - B. The true and only God leads to genuine understanding; believing in Him makes complete sense and is the ultimate truth.
- III. It is a message illuminated in the preaching of Christ.
 - A. Proclaiming the Gospel of Christ focuses on what God has done to save people.
 - B. Proclaiming the Gospel of Christ reminds people that it is the Lord who alone can open eyes to see what real faith is all about (v 5).

Conclusion: We should not be surprised that unbelievers cannot see any value in our Christian faith and service. The world has distracted them with sin because it has nothing better to offer. We can "see," however, both the deadliness of sin and the value of our salvation because God has in the preaching of the Gospel graciously shined into our hearts with the light of Christ.

David F. Seybold

THE FIRST SUNDAY IN LENT

Romans 10:8b-13

February 16, 1986

What do pastors want to happen in the hearts and lives of the people to whom they preach during Lent? Obviously the tone of the season as it concentrates on the suffering of the Savior and the extra services make it an ideal time for faith-building. However, most of our hearers not only claim faith but are probably quite satisfied that their faith is "strong" though it is often misdirected, misinformed, and sometimes just plain wrong. Many things heard or experienced shape what people believe. This Sunday's lessons and especially the text offer a precious opportunity to proclaim again the foundation of faith, the Word!

Introduction: In "The Ancient Mariner" Samuel Coleridge penned the line, "Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink," a pitiful expression of want in the midst

of plenty. This line reminds us of the condition of faith in our world. Faith is much talked about and credited with great things. Still this statement is true: "Faith, faith talked of everywhere, yet so few who do believe." The problem is that too often faith is built on wrong foundations.

The Word on Which to Build Your Faith

- I. People generally do not understand what Christian faith is. Compare the generalities, "I believe in God" and "She's very religious," to what Paul pointedly says in verses 9-10 of the text.
 - A. Faith is, first of all, the conviction of the heart that Christ is Savior.
 1. Faith focuses on the fact of Christ's death and resurrection (cf. Jn 3:16, 1 Cor 15:3b-4, Ro 4:25, 1 Cor 15:57).
 2. But faith is much more than knowledge. It is personal conviction that produces a personal relationship with Christ (Job 19:25, 2 Tm 1:12b, Php 3:7-8).
 3. Too often what is merely in one's head regarding Jesus ("I learned all that stuff") is mistaken for what must be in the heart as well.
 - B. Faith, secondly, produces confession with the mouth about Jesus.
 1. Our Lord expects outward expression as a natural product of the faith in our hearts (Mt 10:32, Ac 4:20).
 2. Witness to our faith is expressed in both what we say and what we do. (Illustrate with examples.)
- II. Saving, life-renewing Christian faith is founded on "the word of faith," the word of the Gospel.
 - A. This word is most certainly "near" us in the abundance of Gospel preaching and teaching which most of us have received since childhood.
 1. The central, simple, clear message of the Scripture is salvation "by grace . . . the gift of God . . . not by works" (Eph 2:8-9, Jn 19:30, 2 Cor 5:19).
 2. There can be no mistake about who it is for whom God intends the Gospel (vs 11-12). (Briefly elaborate on universality of the Gospel and the Great Commission.)
 - B. Unfortunately having the Word in abundance does not guarantee having saving faith.
 1. The Jews (10:1-3) had the word of faith (vs 8, 18), yet in unbelief sought salvation in the law (v 16).
 2. Many today, also in the church, despite their knowledge of the Bible, rest their hope in "my faith" or on doing "the best I can . . ." or they seek a "more relevant" religion in a cult.
 - C. The Gospel must still be unleashed among us if true faith is to exist and grow.
 1. Only by the "word of Christ" is faith created by the Spirit (v 17; Ro 1:16).
 2. "Hearing" involves more than sound on our ears or words on a printed page; it involves
 - a. Listening to God (1 Th 2:13; Catechism, Third Commandment).
 - b. Meditating.
 - c. Listening with the goal of application (Mt 13:3ff.; Lk 11:28; Mt 7:24ff.).
 - d. Using it in battle with evil (Lk 4:1-13).

Conclusion: May our faith increase and be strengthened during this Lenten season, especially as we give attention to the message of Christ, our suffering, dying, yet victorious and living Lord.

Ed Dubberke

St. Louis, Missouri

THE SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT

Philippians 3:17-4:1

February 23, 1986

It is characteristic of sinful man that he does what he pleases for himself and for the here and now. Illustrations of this truth abound in the world around us. Madison Avenue takes advantage of it in its selling techniques. Both of the other lessons for this day illustrate how this same characteristic dominates in many who call themselves God's people but who reject His Word and go their own worldly way. The result is that they put more confidence in the flesh than in the Lord, to use Paul's words in the first part of chapter 3. In their pitiful efforts to become something before God on their own they lose sight of the beauty and power of what believers already are through union with Christ by faith. The apostle's appeal just before the text is both a fitting and necessary reminder for us "Let us live up to what we have already attained."

Introduction: The high value of the dollar in the last few years has moved record numbers of Americans to visit foreign countries. Wherever they go they carry with them their American citizenship. They have both the rights of citizens and the responsibility of representing their homeland. Hopefully they will be recognized as good citizens. The same truth applies to our membership in God's kingdom, of which we are citizens through Christ (Eph 2:19). How essential is it that each of us

Live on Earth as a Citizen of Heaven

- I. It is both natural and to be expected that all believers walk as to the same drumbeat in expression of their oneness in Christ (vv 16, 17).
 - A. By his appeal to follow his example Paul is urging growth in sanctification, to become more and more Christ-like (Mt 16:24, Jn 13:15; Ro 15:5; Php 2:5, He 12:2).
 - B. A vital factor in Christian living besides the working of the Spirit in the Word is having and following positive examples of faith found in Scripture and in other saints both past and present. (1 Cor 11:1; He 11:1ff).
- II. It is a sad reality that many who profess allegiance to Christ demonstrate just the opposite in their lives.
 - A. Paul defines the characteristics of such false citizens of Christ's kingdom.
 1. They are given to shameless gratification of the desires of the flesh (illustrations from our culture abound).
 2. Their hearts are set on the things of this world, not on the things of God.
 3. Such "Christians" love and serve the very things from which Christ, by His cross, came to free us.
 - B. We need to recognize and shun such "enemies of the cross of Christ" lest they become an influence on us, at the same time grieving over what has happened to them (Lk 13:34).
- III. Paul leaves no doubt as to what genuine citizens of the kingdom are like.
 - A. In terms of their life they are all wrapped up in Christ alone.
 1. Instead of all those things of life that promise to satisfy, their one treasure is Christ (Php 3:7-9).
 2. Their aim in life is to serve Him, not sin (Ro 6:1-7; 2 Cor 5:14-15).
 - B. Also in terms of hope for the future they are all wrapped up in Christ (1 Cor 15:42ff, esp. v 58; Jn 14:1-6; Col 3:1-4).

Conclusion: As we re-evaluate the citizenship which our lives reflect during this Lenten season we do well to heed Paul's final admonition in the text: "Stand firm in the Lord, dear friends."

Ed Dubberke

THE THIRD SUNDAY IN LENT

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

March 2, 1986

Introduction: The final verses of this text are often used to comfort Christians who are experiencing sickness, economic difficulties, tragedy, even death. Temptation, in terms of such usage, is understood to be the trials referred to in 1 Peter 1:6-9. Actually, the temptation of which Paul speaks here is an inducement to sin, in this context the sin of presumption. To presume, or to have presumption, it "to behave with arrogance or without proper respect, to take something for granted." Paul's line of argument in the text follows from the fear, which he expresses in 9:27, of knowing the grace of God but still ending up disqualified at the end of the race. He warns us not to presume upon God's grace, and yet uses the very same grace as

The Escape from Presumption

- I. In spite of our sin, God's grace renews and changes our lives.
 - A. God was gracious to the Israelites.
 1. They were sinful people. Nowhere are we told that Israel deserved to be saved from the bondage of Egypt.
 2. Yet God delivered them. Theirs was a select relationship as God graciously made them His own people (vv 1-4).
 - B. God is still gracious to us.
 1. On account of our sins we deserve nothing but God's wrath and punishment.
 2. But, as God saved Israel, He continues to cleanse us in the waters of Baptism and gives us to drink from the Rock in whom we have salvation (v 4). He graciously makes us His new Israel to live as such.
- II. In spite of His grace, He punishes us when we live as if nothing is changed.
 - A. It happened to the Children of Israel. Despite the fact that they were saved from Egypt to continue to be His covenant people, their sins were a presumption on God's grace (vv 7-10) and God punished them (v 5).
 - B. We can presume upon God's grace.
 1. By thinking that we are automatically in the kingdom of God by virtue of congregational membership (v 12).
 2. By living as if grace is not always needed, a self-righteousness that denigrates the cross (Ga 2:21).
 3. By, worst of all, claiming to be God's people, yet living completely otherwise (Mt 17:7).
 - C. We can come under God's judgment. "These things are warnings for us." God still overthrows those who presume upon, if not spurn, His grace and live as if nothing needs change.
- III. In spite of our presumption, God is ready to forgive us and protect us against it.
 - A. God knows how we are tempted to presume upon His grace. The text ends on a word of promise, rather than one of doom, as our human condition is understood (v 13).
 - B. He gives us Christ as a way to escape. God's Son confronted the Tempter and won the victory. In Christ we have strength to fend off temptation, forgiveness when we do sin, the capacity to endure and remain as God's people.
 - C. Thus we will not want to presume upon His grace. God is so good to us! Shall we presume upon the love of the One who is so gracious to us? No! By His grace we live as His changed children.

Conclusion: The temptation is to presume upon God's grace. But we never need presume about God's grace. It is evident. It gives us escape from false presumption. It gives us daily victory in Christ.

Luther G. Strasen
Fort Wayne, Indiana

THE FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

1 Corinthians 1:18, 22-25

March 9, 1986

Introduction: In our pluralistic society we are bombarded with all types of ideas as to whom to listen to next, how to run our lives, where to find satisfaction and how to be sure that we are in control. The advice is actually spiritual, though it certainly is not labeled as such, because it deals with the relationships we have with others (which have much in common with our prior relationship, or lack of such, with God). It is not always easy to sort out all the input as to whether it truly is in tune, if even helpful, for our Christian experience. It is probably easier to attach ourselves to some person or concept that appeals to us and promote whatever it is as being what best empowers our lives. The Apostle Paul was aware that the Corinthian Christians were selecting leadership and advice from all sides and that those who found what satisfied them were haughty and quarrelsome with those who did not have what was deemed the best (1 Cor. 1:10-12). The apostle understood that such behavior and attitudes threaten the power of the cross of Christ (1:17), which is what truly best empowers us. Thus this text still instructs us as we live in the world in our day. What continues to be the best for us is

The Power of the Cross

- I. Power is not found in human signs and wisdom.
 - A. Signs and wisdom have always had high priority (v 22).
 1. The Jews demanded signs (Jn 2:18) and the Greeks sought wisdom, systems of philosophy to guide one's destiny and keep life under control.
 2. It is still so. The Shroud of Turin or the ruins of the ark are considered to be faith-authenticating. Astrology, "how to live" books, sects and their leaders are looked to for spiritual direction and power for daily living.
 - B. But signs and wisdom are found wanting.
 1. Signs do not work faith. The Jewish leaders saw Jesus' burial clothes and still did not believe. The apostles did not carry them about to convince people of Jesus' resurrection. Ark ruins do not make Christians.
 2. All "wisdom" is not true guidance. The "me first" concept of these years inhibits good relationships. The depreciation of the nuclear family has harmed society. Sects last as long as their leaders.
 - C. And those who seek and find inadequate signs and wisdom are perishing even as they think they are succeeding (v 18).
- II. Power is found in the cross of Christ.
 - A. The Christ of the cross is God's power and wisdom (v 24).
 1. The power that saves us when we are weak and faced with destruction (Ro 5:8-9).
 2. The wisdom that presents God's grace to us in the midst of our sin and inability to save ourselves (Eph 2:8-9).
 - B. The world discounts God's power.
 1. It is a stumbling block. The Jews looked to the keeping of the Law, rather than the promise of the Messiah. It is still argued that the idea of God saving us takes away from the dignity achieved in saving ourselves by our own power in which we can boast (Eph 2:9).

2. It is foolishness. The Greeks considered the resurrection to be absurd (Ac 17:32) and it is still attacked today. What is even regarded as more foolish is the undeserved forgiveness which God offers. How ridiculous it seems to forgive with open arms, with no vengeance, without even a period of testing repentance (Lk 15:11-32)! It gives up our power over others.
- C. But to us the cross of Christ is the power and wisdom of God (vv 24-25).
 1. Its very foolishness and weakness defeats Satan and destroys the terror of death.
 2. It restores the joy of forgiveness, the power to live for God and others, the certain hope of heaven.

Conclusion: The power of Christ crucified is for all people (v 24). Paul was caught up in the preaching of it. As it empowers us, we rejoice as God uses us to engage others in its power and wisdom that answers our deepest needs (Lk 15:24).

Luther G. Strasen

THE FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Philippians 3:8-14

March 16, 1986

Introduction: Cheap grace and self-righteousness—neither of these gives glory to God, but they do bring into focus one of the paradoxes of the Christian faith. In Christ, we have perfect righteousness. All the perfection of Jesus Christ is imputed to the believer by faith. Yet this truth is never an occasion for complacency or indifference, but rather it spurs us on to ever greater conformity of life to confession. Although we are perfect in Christ we strive for perfection more and more each day.

The Paradox of the Righteous

- I. Righteousness which we possess perfectly.
 - A. Righteousness comes apart from the law.
 1. The temptation exists to glory in one's own accomplishments, "pedigree," endurance (context).
 2. These can never make or give perfect righteousness (v 9).
 3. Rather they are counted as loss for the sake of Christ (v 8).
 - B. Righteousness comes from God alone.
 1. It is founded in God's actions, not our own efforts (v 9).
 2. It comes for the sake of Christ by grace through faith (v 9).
 3. Although righteous in Christ, we strive for righteousness (v 13).
- II. Righteousness for which we strive.
 - A. The righteous are aware of their own imperfection (lack of righteousness).
 1. We are not perfect (vv 12, 13).
 2. We have comfort and assurance but are not complacent or indifferent (v 12).
 - B. We press on, reaching for what lies ahead in Christ.
 1. Using the means by which God sustains us (vv 10, 11).
 2. Fulfilling the purpose for which Christ has called us (v 14).

Norbert Mueller

PALM SUNDAY**Philippians 2:5-11****March 23, 1986**

Introduction: The text deals with servanthood, self-denial, and obedience. These are all concepts repugnant to the flesh, but characteristic of vital Christian faith. On this Palm Sunday, we ponder again the servanthood of Christ in terms of his self-denial and obedience as it relates to God's great redemptive purpose for the world.

The Servant, Jesus Christ

- I. The Servant who denies Himself.
 - A. Christ has a legitimate claim to deity.
 - B. Christ humbles Himself.
 1. He pours Himself out (v 7).
 2. He takes on the form of a servant (v 7).
- II. The Servant who is obedient unto death.
 - A. He dies the death of the cross (v 8).
 1. In fulfillment of all righteousness (2 Cor 5:21).
 2. In fulfillment of God's prophetic promises of redemption (Mt 20:18; Lk 24:26, 27).
 - B. His obedience makes possible the new creation (v 5).
 1. Every knee will bow at the name of Jesus (v 10).
 2. Every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord (v 11).
 3. Everything redounds to the glory of God the Father (v 11).
 - C. His servanthood becomes a model for our servanthood in the world (v 5).

Norbert Mueller

EASTER**1 Corinthians 15:1-11****March 30, 1986**

Holy Week is hectic for a pastor. Here, however, he may take heart. This text has nothing new or tricky in it. In fact, Paul indicates that he is going to tell his readers again, or remind them, of what he has preached to them before. Here is another chance to preach the Gospel—this time to assure the people of their resurrection. And the preacher may bask in this Gospel himself and be fortified in his own spirit so to proclaim: Christ is risen!

Introduction: Christ is risen! I guarantee it! Such a bold statement might evoke this question: "What would become of me if He were not risen?" Well, if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins; and those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. In other words, if Christ did not rise from the dead, you and I are in deep, deep trouble (1 Cor. 15:17-19). But Christ is risen! It is with a great sense of relief and joy that we hear from God's Word the good news that

Your Resurrection Is Guaranteed

- I. We need this guarantee of our resurrection. In a world that is moving fast on an unstable course, we need something solid on which to hang our hopes.
 - A. The Corinthians had somehow lost this fundamental teaching of the resurrection.
 1. Paul had taught them about it as one of the foremost teachings of the Gospel, and they had accepted it.
 2. Something happened to raise doubts in their minds—the appearance of a teacher, perhaps, or some rationalization.
 - B. We are not above forgetting or doubting it either.
 1. We have plenty of outside influences, such as the media, banging away at our faith.
 2. We tend to forget because of our natural fear of dying. Since we talk little about death, why talk of rising from the dead? How many times have we stared at a corpse and wondered how it could ever live again?

Transition: We need assurance; we want a guarantee that Christ lives and that we will live also.

- II. The Gospel offers this guarantee to us.
 - A. The Gospel is a valid source.
 1. Paul declares that he did not make it up. He had witnesses to the resurrection: Peter, the twelve, five hundred brothers, James, and finally, later on, Paul himself (vv 5-8).
 2. The Gospel has guaranteeing power. It assured Paul: “O death where is your sting? . . .” (vv 55-57).
 3. The Gospel assures people today. The unbeliever resigns himself to death with an attitude of “whatever will be, will be.” The believer assigns himself to God in the firm and real hope of rising again. Was not this the peace of our departed loved ones who died in Christ? It works!
 - B. The Gospel guarantees because of its content. Christ died and lives for us.
 1. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures (v 3). Isaiah had predicted that the Messiah would be led as a lamb to the slaughter.
 2. Christ was buried (v 4). He was really dead. This makes the resurrection more certain than if He had been dead for only an hour or so.
 3. Christ was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. Psalm 16 stated: “. . . You will not abandon Me to the grave, nor will You let Your Holy One see decay.”
 4. Christ’s resurrection is the center of our Christian faith, from which we gather our hope.
- III. The Spirit leads us to utilize this guarantee,
 - A. To receive it in faith, regardless of our feelings. Luther states (*What Luther Says*, page 1215): “If you want to judge according to what you see and feel and, when the Word of God is set before you, want to pit your feeling against it and say: you tell me much; but my heart speaks a different language, and if you felt what I feel, you too would speak differently—then you do not have the Word of God in the heart but have quenched and extinguished it by your own thoughts, reason, and brooding. In short, if you will not let the Word mean more to you than all your feeling, eyes, senses, and heart, you must be lost, and there is no further help for you.

For we are concerned with an article of faith, not an article of your reason or wisdom or human power. Therefore you must judge solely according to the Word in this matter, irrespective of what you feel and see."

- B. To stand firm in faith. "...This is what we preach, and this is what you believed" (v 11).

1. We preach this message over and over because the Gospel is the soil to which the roots of our faith cling.
2. The only way to remain confident of our resurrection is to remain sure of Christ's resurrection.
3. We live confidently. We live expecting a resurrection. We live as though there is a tomorrow.

Conclusion: The Gospel guarantees our resurrection. We say with Job: "I know that my Redeemer lives; . . . in my flesh will I see God" (Job 19:26-27).

Lowell F. Thomas
Fort Myers, Florida

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Revelation 1:4-18

April 6, 1986

Verses 4-6 are a greeting and verses 5b-6 the doxology within the greeting. Verses 7-8 Martin Franzmann calls "a sort of introit" to the worship service of which the reading of the letter was to be a part. These verses are the theme song of the entire book. Verse 7 speaks of the triumphal return of Christ, while in verse 8 the Lord speaks of Himself as the eternal and almighty one. Jesus supplies the power to endure patiently the tribulation which comes to all Christians as members of Christ's kingdom (v 9). Verse 13 makes clear that the eternal Son is in the midst of His church as tribulations come. Although He now wears a human form, He is the glorified Messiah whose divine attributes are graphically described in verses 13-16. Verse 17 describes the reaction of a sinful human being to divine holiness, but also the great comfort given by Jesus Christ.

Introduction: Most people believe in God, but what kind of God? God is known only through Jesus Christ. The text presents the first in a series of visions of the Lord God in the person of Jesus Christ.

What a Lord We Have!

- I. He is above us.
 - A. He is above us in dominion.
 1. He, not Caesar (the emperor Domitian called himself "lord and god"), is the Lord (v 13b).
 2. He rules our world and the universe.
 - B. He is above us in glory (vs 14, 15, 16).
 - C. He is above us in holiness. (He has eyes from which nothing evil is hidden, feet that will pursue evil to punish it, and a mouth that judges all evil.)

Transition: A Lord who is so far above us can frighten us as he did John. But Christ came to John, touched him gently and said, "Fear not." He is not against us.

II. He is for us.

A. Christ showed He is for us by dying for us (v 17).

1. The Eternal, the First and the Last, actually died.
2. He died to make atonement for our sins.

B. He showed He is for us by rising from the dead (v 18).

1. He lives forever (Ro 6:9).
2. He has authority over death (v 18). We need not fear death, for Jesus went through it and conquered it for us.

Transition: He will support us with His power by being with us at the time of death, but every day, right now.

III. He is with us.

A. He is with us in our tribulation.

1. Christ was with His suffering church then (v 13).
2. He is still with His church, which may not be afflicted in the same way as was the church in John's day but which nevertheless is plagued with apathy, indifference, and lovelessness.

B. He is with us to renew and strengthen us.

1. Through the Word and Sacraments He moves us to repentance and firmer faith.
2. He supplies us with the endurance we need to overcome defeat and discouragement.

Conclusion: In Christ we see what a Lord we have, one who is above us, for us, and with us.

Gerhard Aho

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Revelation 5:11-14

April 13, 1986

The preceding thought unit (vs 6-10) focuses on the Lamb, Christ, who brings and end to the weeping (hopelessness) of the world. By taking from the Creator the scroll on which the future of the church and of the world is written, He shows He has taken up His power and reign. This action evokes the new song of praise which continues in the text, praise that Christ has redeemed all people. The text begins with the host of angels joining in the song of all creatures. This song of praise focuses on Jesus Christ and on what He has done. Following the text, the new chapter (6) begins with an account of the troubles to be loosed upon the world before the final consummation. The praise given to the Lamb in the text makes clear that in the midst of the troubles the Lamb is in control and that all creatures must eventually acknowledge Him to be Redeemer and Lord. The song of praise climaxes with might and glory being ascribed to the Lamb alone and with all those singing His praises falling down in silent adoration.

Introduction: Worship can be a human-centered experience directed toward our own well-being and improvement, so that we become concerned only with our personal returns in worship, with what we individually are going to get out of it. That is a misplaced emphasis in worship. From this obsession and preoccupation with ourselves our text would free us. The heavenly hosts by their action are saying to us:

Give Adoration to Jesus Christ

- I. Because He was slain for our redemption.
 - A. His blood alone could redeem us.
 1. We could not ransom ourselves, and yet blood had to be shed (He 9:22).
 2. His precious blood had power to redeem, for He Himself was innocent (1 Pe 1:18:19; Eph 1:7; 1 Jn 1:7).
 - B. Through His redeeming blood we have come into His kingdom (Re 5:10).
 1. This kingdom is hidden now.
 2. It will finally be revealed and we will reign with Him.
- II. Because He is the supreme Lord.
 - A. The symbol of His supremacy is the throne (v 13). Jesus has been exalted (Php 2:9).
 - B. His supremacy manifests itself (v 12).
 1. He has all power (Mt 28:20).
 2. He has all wealth (2 Cor 8:9; Eph 3:8).
 3. He has all wisdom (1 Cor 1:24; 1 Cor 1:30).
 4. He has all might (Jn 10:18) (resurrection).
 - C. He is to be worshipped as the supreme Lord (v 13).
 1. Everything on the earth, under it, and above it praises Him (Ps 148).
 2. There is satisfaction in acknowledging God in Jesus Christ for who and what He is. We do this well in such canticles as the *Te Deum Laudamus*.

Conclusion: When we focus on God we will be helped. When we adore Christ we will be built up. So let us not only wail our litanies and cry our petitions. Let us also learn the language of praise. There is something mysterious, beautiful, and uplifting taking place when we with the four living creatures say, "Amen," and fall down and worship Jesus Christ.

Gerhard Aho

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Revelation 7:9-17

April 20, 1986

Whenever we confess the third article of the Apostles Creed, we are responding to the future reality revealed in John's Revelation. In this pericope we have a projected glimpse of the "Holy Christian Church" triumphant. The "forgiveness of sins" qualifies the church for white robes and provides the purity they symbolize. Those standing before the throne have experienced the "resurrection of the body." This is a clear vision of "life everlasting" for which the church on earth awaits eagerly. Care must be taken by the preacher so that he does not get carried away with what is "up there" at the expense of what is "down here" now for the believer's comfort and strength. After all, the Book of Revelation is provided for the blessing of believers on earth. The church in glory lives in fulfilment of this vision, and so shall we. The Shepherd who became a Lamb dominates the vision and, of course, should dominate the sermon.

Introduction: Whenever we begin a trip, we usually have some destination in mind. We picture in our minds the country through which we will pass, what we will be able to see when we arrive, and who will be there to meet us. We try to plan the

activities which will occupy us while we are there. Sometimes our plans work, other times not. When Jesus the Good Shepherd invites us to follow Him, He is leading us on a path that will finally end in heaven. None of us has been there, but we are anxious to get there because of John's vision of what it is like there. "We want to be in that number when the saints go marching in." John gives us a glimpse of what is in store for us when

The Saints Alive Arrive in Heaven

- I. They are united, though once divided.
 - A. The divisions in this life are obvious.
 1. Boundaries are drawn according to nation, tribe, people, and language (v 9).
 2. Even Christians are divided into denominations.
 - B. The one fold about which Jesus talked (Jn 10) will be a reality.
 1. The confession of men and angels are united (vv 10, 12).
 2. Through this confession the boundaries dissolve.
 3. Because of this unity, the number is amazingly large (v 9).
 4. We can begin now to praise God for the unity of all believers in Christ.

Transition: "Who are these people?" the elder asks.

- II. They are victorious, though once defeated.
 - A. The saints in heaven have been confronted by the defeat of sin and tribulation.
 1. Sin is like a polluted garment. It disqualifies one for heaven. The residents of heaven were once sinners, just as we are.
 2. We must through many tribulations, great and small, enter the kingdom of God. What are our trials?
 - B. God provides their victory.
 1. He gives His Lamb's blood, in which believers wash their robes (v 14). "The Blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7).
 2. The same grace assures us that nothing will be able to separate us from God and His love (Ro 8:38-39). God strengthens us so that we keep the upper hand over our troubles.
 - C. "Salvation belongs to our God . . . and the Lamb" (v 10).
 1. This heavenly song is our confession and our hope. Our victory does not rest in our hands.
 2. Sin and tribulation are temporary. God will give us the victory, too.

Transition: Life on earth is difficult. When we join the saints in heaven we will be forever delivered.

- III. They are secure, though once afraid.
 - A. The opposite of faith is fear. Sometimes our faith begins to buckle under the strains in life.
 1. Thirst, the sun at noon, and scorching heat (Florida in August) represent the whole gamut of life-threatening enemies (v 16).
 2. It is our nature to put off as long as we can the "walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps 23). Even artificial hearts are broken.
 - B. God provides security.
 1. In heaven God will spread His tent over His people with this declaration to all our foes: "Never again!" (v 16).
 2. The Lamb of God will be the Shepherd to give "living water." Compare this water to the medicine that makes a disease go away, never to come again.

3. We shall have no more tears. When God wipes a tear, that is the end of them.

Conclusion: Let us not wait until we die to enjoy the gifts of this vision. By faith in Christ we can draw on the strength of our unity with all believers, the victory Christ won for us, and the security we have in God's power.

Lowell F. Thomas
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THE FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

April 27, 1986

Revelation 21:1-5

The first verse of the text immediately confronts us with the concept of newness. While exegetes disagree as to whether God will annihilate the present world or merely re-do it, it seems to this writer that the Biblical language used in various places does not favor the idea of the earth being rebuilt. Suffice it to say, however, that the "new heaven and new earth" will be radically different from the present one. While the "new Jerusalem" is mentioned in verse 2 of the text, that concept is dealt with more fully in the text for next Sunday (cf. v 10ff.). This text gives God's people a vision of what He has prepared for them so that they might be encouraged in their good fight of faith until they receive the crown of life. The problem is that our limited vision in an evil world so easily causes us to become discouraged in and side-tracked from the Lord's work.

Introduction: "Futurists" are people employed by large corporations or governmental agencies to analyze the past and present, evaluate their findings, and project what they feel is likely to happen in the years to come. Thank God, He has given His church a "futurist" - the Apostle John, who by inspiration of the Spirit gives us a peek into our eternal future. As he nears the end of his revelation in our text, John urges our highest anticipation:

Hallelujah! Look Ahead!

- I. Look to a new order.
 - A. The present heaven and earth shall pass away (v 1; 1 Pe 3:7, 10b, 12).
 - B. The new order is coming.
 1. In his vision John sees it as accomplished (v 1a).
 2. It is created by God (v 5a). It is the same God who created our world at the beginning of time.
 3. Even nature itself looks forward to it (Ro 8:22-23).
- II. Look to a close relationship.
 - A. God dwells with men (v 3).
 - B. It is a covenant of love.
 1. His people.
 - a. It is the opposite of the natural status (1 Pe 2:10).
 - b. It is made possible by the sacrifice of the Lamb (1 Pe 1:19).
 2. Their God—it recalls the Old Testament covenant with Israel (Eze 37:26-27).
 - C. It is an untroubled relationship.
 1. Whatever his age, each of us can recall his own troubles. (The preacher

can say to his hearers, "Think of two things that cause you anxiety or sorrow. What was it that last caused you to 'cry your heart out'?"

2. Heaven is free of these and all other troubles. Our loving Lord will remove all tears and everything negative in the new life in heaven (v 4; Ro 8:21). He will remove them permanently—ban them (v 4). We shall have glorified bodies. Satan, the ultimate source of evil, will be forever banished. Pain is a warning of something wrong; in heaven nothing will be wrong.

III. Look ahead in joyous anticipation.

- A. It is joyous because it is sure.
 1. God promised; He does not lie (v 5; 2 Cor 1:20; 2 Pe 3:13).
 2. The "proof" is our Immanuel, Jesus.
- B. It is joyous because the vision sustains us.
 1. The axiom is this: You can endure nearly anything for a while (e.g. Job, 1 Pe 1:7-9).
 2. Revelation was written to encourage the church of Jesus to live and witness confidently under fire.
 3. Your joyous anticipation will sustain you as your faith is questioned, your Christian life challenged, and your trust in the Lord tested.

Conclusion: Like the early Christians, God has placed us on planet earth—in the midst of trouble, heartache, and persecution—for a while. But you belong to the risen, living Christ. Do not be discouraged, dismayed, or derailed. Look ahead to what is coming—a new order, an inseparable relationship with Christ Himself. Live and work in joyous anticipation of it!

Lloyd Strelow
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THE SIXTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23

May 4, 1986

Our people are increasingly exposed to a strong dose of "fundamentalistic" theology, especially regarding the end times. While this text insists that the preacher correct false notions, he must do it with love and care, lest he merely "blast the opposition" and fail to edify the hearer. The text is full of important, figurative language describing the "church triumphant." It is the great climax, where God's children by faith in the Lamb will reach the goal for which He came—eternal bliss with Him as their pride, joy and glory. What a fitting theme as we anticipate His ascension!

Introduction: Every religious body has its "sacred sites," its "holy places." One site considered sacred to several religions is Jerusalem. In our text we are instructed about Jerusalem in a way that may surprise, but will edify you. Our text presents

The Holy City—The Church in Heaven

- I. Its origin.
 - A. The church is from heaven. God is its creator (v 10b; v 2; Is 65:17-18; He 11:10).
 - B. The church is built of spiritual relationships.
 1. It stands in contrast to the kingdoms of the world shown to Jesus (Mt 4:8; cf. v 10).

2. Scripture affirms its spiritual nature (as the bride, the Lamb's wife, v 9; 22:17; Ga 4:26; He 12:22-23).
 - C. This truth destroys all expectations of the erection of a citadel or city in Israel.
- II. Its content.
- A. The New Jerusalem is big enough to hold all believers (note the wall, v 12; Re 7:9).
 - B. The holy city is for believers (note the gates and the twelve tribes, vv12-13; Re 7:4; cf. also Ro 2:28-29; Ro 11:26; He 11:16; Re 22:14).
 - C. The New Jerusalem is built on the foundation of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (v 14). They lived with the Lamb, saw Him sacrificed for sin, and staked their lives on Him.
- III. Its focus.
- A. Its focus is not a physical building.
 1. The temple in Jerusalem was the focal point of contact between God and His people in the Old Testament (cf. Ex 23:7; Dt 12:5).
 2. The temple was desecrated (Lk 19:45-47) by God's people and destroyed in 70 AD.
 - B. Its focus is God.
 1. The Almighty Father, loving Lord of all, who gave us His Son (Ro 8:32; v 22a).
 2. The Lamb Himself, glorified, enthroned with the Father (v 22b).
 - B. Its focus is the event of the ages.
 1. It is better than any Hollywood extravaganza or presidential inaugural.
 2. The glory of God upon whom the heavenly church focuses is so bright that it eliminates any need for such earthly illumination as sun and moon (v 23). Note the glory of the city described in verses 18-21.

Conclusion: This holy city, this New Jerusalem, is our future, eternal home. By God's grace in Christ, the church on earth is ushered into God's presence to become His church in heaven. Therefore, do not become entrapped by those who twist Scripture and get their followers all excited about the political resurgence of a nation, the "mass conversion" of the Jews, and the physical rebuilding of a temple in Jerusalem on earth. Rather rejoice that in His great love, Christ is building His church in heaven of ancients and moderns, Jews and Gentiles, Palestinians and Americans—of all who look to the Lamb for pardon and long to be with Him in the holy city, the New Jerusalem, the church in heaven.

Lloyd Strelow

THE SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Revelation 22:12-17, 20

May 11, 1986

John in exile on the island of Patmos concludes his letter to the seven churches with a promise that Jesus is coming again soon. The believers, torn by false teachers and temptations from within and increasing persecution from without, welcome the coming of Jesus with courage for the present and hope for an eternal dwelling in the city of God.

Introduction: Thursday we celebrated the Ascension of our Lord. As the disciples gazed into the heavens, the two men in white explained: "This same Jesus who was

taken up into heaven will come in the same way that you have seen Him go into heaven." We still live in the time between Ascension Day and the Second Coming of Christ. As we prepare to celebrate Pentecost next week and face the daily pressures of living in a secular world, St. John in the Book of Revelation directs us to

The Coming Again of Our Ascended Lord

- I. His announcement (vv 12-16, 20a).
 - A. Death to unbelievers (v 13).
 1. Jesus strongly asserts His coming again as bringing recompense. To the "dogs" and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, His coming means life forever outside the gates of the city of God. They continue in sin and reject the announcement.
 2. Jesus likewise speaks judgment to our sinful, secular world. To the extent that we succumb to false teachers and immorality, we stand in danger of rejecting His announcement. We confess our blindness.
 - B. Life to believers (vv 14, 16, 17b).
 1. Jesus graciously offers robes washed in His blood and water without price (Is 55). The persecuted believers are preserved for eternal life in the city of God by Christ, the bright morning star, the root and offspring of David.
 2. Jesus graciously offers us His cleansing forgiveness as the Son of David, crucified and risen. We can be preserved from this sinful, secular world as we look to Him.
- II. Our invitation (vv 17, 20b).
 - A. The Spirit, the bride, and the believer invite Jesus to come and supply courage now.
 1. The persecuted invite Jesus to come and in the process receive living water to strengthen them for faithful ministry.
 2. We likewise stand strong as we invite His early return; we are refreshed.
 - B. The church invites Jesus to come and supply hope for the future.

Conclusion: What a joyful announcement from Jesus! What an eager invitation from our lips—power for living from the coming again of our ascended Lord!

Stephen J. Carter

PENTECOST

Acts 2:37-47

May 18, 1986

After the Lord's final instructions to the disciples to be witnesses, His promise of power from the Holy Spirit, and His ascension into heaven, the disciples wait prayerfully in Jerusalem. On Pentecost the Spirit fills the house where they are gathered. Jews from many nations hear the Gospel message. Peter preaches a powerful Law and Gospel sermon which culminates in the words of the text. The Jerusalem fellowship of believers in Jesus Christ is initiated with the baptism of three thousand. The fellowship grows in both quantity and quality.

Introduction: Pentecost is an annual feast in the Christian church year and provides important emphasis on the Holy Spirit, described by one author as the "half-known God." But, more significantly, Pentecost is an opportunity for you to move

back in time and stand in that notable assembly of Jews from around the world where, spellbound by Peter, the big fisherman, you experience

The Powerful Effects of a Pentecost Message

- I. The Pentecost message cuts to the heart (v 37).
 - A. The Jewish hearers recognized their own guilt in Peter's account of the rejection of Jesus Christ. They cried out, "What shall we do?"
 - B. We recognize our own guilt as our hearts are sometimes hardened to the weekly message of Jesus Christ.
- II. The Pentecost message brings forgiveness of sins through baptism (vv 38-41).
 - A. The Jewish hearers were transformed by Peter's description of the crucified and risen Christ and were baptized.
 - B. We hear again the message of the crucified and risen Christ and apply the power of our baptism to daily living (the gift of the Holy Spirit promised to us who are far off, vv 38-39).
- III. The Pentecost message creates a dynamic fellowship of believers (vv 42-47).
 - A. The early believers joined in regular worship and study of the Word (vv 42, 46, 47). Despite our times of indifference to the Word, the Pentecost message creates in us a desire for regular reception of Word and sacraments through worship and Bible study.
 - B. The early believers joined in meeting physical and spiritual needs (vv 43-45). They formed a common treasury and shared bread in their homes. Despite our selfishness and individualism, the Pentecost message creates in us a desire to reach out to others to meet their physical and spiritual needs.
 - C. The early believers joined in word-and-deed witness through which the Lord added to their number (v 47b). Despite our self-absorption and timidity, the Pentecost message creates in us the desire and the ability to witness in word and deed so that the Lord may add to our fellowship those who are being saved.

Conclusion: Because we have been present at Pentecost to hear Peter, the Holy Spirit cuts us to our hearts, brings assurance of Christ's forgiveness through baptism, and gives us the privilege to participate in a dynamic fellowship of believers—worshipping, meeting needs, and witnessing to others . . . These are the powerful effects of a Pentecost message!

Stephen J. Carter