

St. Paul's...

Hilltop News

JANUARY & FEBRUARY 2017

Dearly Beloved in Christ,

Blessed Advent, Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year to all of You! This is a very special time of year for the Christian. The world celebrates the cold and snow of winter, fun and family in song and parties (and to put you at-ease, there's nothing inherently wrong with Christmas carols and parties!). Yet, we in the Church have spent our time preparing ourselves for Christ's coming. Advent speaks of three comings: How Christ has come in the flesh on Christmas; His coming into our hearts through preaching, Holy Absolution, Holy Baptism, and The Holy Communion (His Means of Grace); and also His coming on the Last Day to judge the living and the dead. All can be easily summarized in the question; How does one prepare? "He is properly prepared who believes these words, 'Given and shed for the remission of sins.' Whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: 'forgiveness of sins.'" (Small Catechism, Sacrament of the Altar) This, in short, is the Christian faith and what we observe as all year long, but especially at this time of year.

This faith confesses sin. You admit God is right when He says you are a poor, miserable sinner who deserves nothing but death and damnation for you can do nothing good in His sight. This faith also confesses Jesus. You take what Jesus did upon The Cross and firmly believe that he has rescued you from what you deserve and imputes to you His righteousness. He tells you your sins are forgiven because He died and rose for you; faith believes it and receives this forgiveness in His Means of Grace. Finally faith confesses that it wants to do better; that is, it wants to live as a dear child who wants to please its dear Father. For God The Father is our dear Father in heaven Who sent us His Son Jesus, Who was born at this time, that we may be recreated in His image.

This is why Jesus was born. He was not born merely because He thought it would be a fun thing to do, to take on our flesh. He knows this life is not perfect. He knows it can get messy. He knows it is full of sin and sorrow. He has first-hand experience with all of the brokenness of this world and life! He knew exactly what He was being sent into. Yet, He still submits to the Father as he is willingly sent down into the filth of our sins to pull us up out of it. He comes to make us sinners holy. He comes to wash us clean of sin. We once were sinners. Now we are God's children. We need not be terrified, as the world is, at His coming and what it means. Our God delights in us, as a father dotes over his newborn son or daughter. We can run to Him and ask Him for whatever we need, and He will surely bless us.

Martin Luther once captured this image of the Christian life well as he pondered the image of the Nativity of our Lord:

Let us, then, meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. I would not have you contemplate the deity of Christ, the majesty of Christ, but rather his flesh. Look upon the baby Jesus. Divinity may terrify man.

Inexpressible majesty will crush him. That is why Christ took on our humanity, save for sin, that he should not terrify us but rather that with love and favor he should console and confirm.

Behold Christ lying in the lap of his young mother, still a virgin. What can be sweeter than the Babe, what more lovely than the mother! What fairer than her youth! What more gracious than her virginity! Look at the Child, knowing nothing. Yet all that is belongs to him, that your conscience should not fear but take comfort in him. Doubt nothing. Watch him springing in the lap of the maiden. Laugh with him. Look upon this Lord of Peace and your spirit will be at peace. See how God invites you in many ways. He places before you a babe with whom you may take refuge. You cannot fear him, for nothing is more appealing to man than a babe. Are you affrighted? Then come to him, lying in the lap of the fairest and sweetest maid. You will see how great is the divine goodness, which seeks above all else that you should not despair. Trust him! Trust him! Here is the child in whom is salvation.

To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe, playing in the lap and at the breasts of his most gracious mother. Who is there whom this sight would not comfort? Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience, and guilt, if you come to behold this gurgling Babe and believe that he is come, not to judge you, but to save.
(Martin Luther's Christmas Book, ed. by Roland H. Bainton)

The Services this time of the year are among the most beautiful. Not in empty sentimentality, but because of how beautifully in Word, Hymn, Liturgy and Aesthetics, we confess our Christian faith.

- On Christmas Eve at 6:00PM we gather to hear the children tell from God's Word the most important story every told—the birth of the Savior of the whole world! What a most worthy story to pass on from generation to generation!
- On Christ-mas Day at 10:00AM we will receive The Word made flesh in preaching and His Sacrament. In fact the Word "Christ-Mass" points us to The Christ Who is received in The Holy Communion. He was born of Mary to give His life for us, to save us, and we receive the benefits of His death when we receive His Sacrament.
- On New Year's Eve at 6:00PM we will look back over the year past and ahead to the new year, confessing our sins to God and trusting in His forgiveness.
- On New Year's Day at 10:00AM we will celebrate the feast of the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus. A seemingly obscure festival in the Church year, but one of great importance. When Joseph circumcised The Child; He took on for us the load of The Law. To keep it for us completely, because we can't. He is Named Jesus because He is The Lord Who saves His people from their sins. The Blood He shed on that day and upon The Cross 33 years later we shall drink at His Altar for the forgiveness of sins.

This is truly a most wonderful time of year! I am blessed beyond measure to share in it this year, as just six months ago I was Called to serve here as the undershepherd of Christ Jesus. Caring for you and delivering to you the gifts of Christ for you, the forgiveness of sins, in Word and Sacrament through the blessed Office of Holy Ministry. I thank you all from the bottom of my heart how you have received me this year, and for all of your kindness and love, in gifts and so many ways, which you have shown to me as your pastor. Thank you.

In Christ our Savior, Pastor Sean