

Dec. 11, 2011, Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Worthy of the Covenant

This morning I want to talk about Santa Claus. Santa Claus is everywhere! In every mall there is a Santa Claus. He shows up at Christmas parties, on tv specials, in ads, at school events----everywhere this time of year!

Don't get me wrong! I really have nothing against Santa Claus!

I think the idea that a very generous, jolly old elf would deliver toys to every girl and boy on earth in a single night is a very happy, loving idea.

But where I get into trouble is with the thought that 'he sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good!' !!

I'm sorry, but that just seems like stalking to me---very creepy that someone is watching while I sleep and knows my every action and intention.

Just what kind of person is Santa Claus anyway??

And then what if I'm not good enough? What if I end up on the "Naughty" list? There have been years when I wasn't sure if I would get presents or just a lump of coal in my stocking.

It's a lot of pressure, a lot of uncertainty, and, let's face it! A lot of fear in this thought that you have to be good enough to get good things for Christmas. What if you didn't start being good early enough before Christmas? Are you supposed to be good the WHOLE year? Or just since Thanksgiving? Or what?

How long can a person be good, anyway? It's a lot to ask to never, ever be bad, even once during the whole year! We're only human, aren't we?

We might think all of this is funny, or ridiculous, or stupid, but really, it isn't.

Because the scariest part of all this, to me, is that for too many people, this twisted version of Santa has far too much in common with God.

Too many people have a twisted-up version of God as Big-spy-in-the-sky, who keeps tabs on whether we're good or bad, writing it all down in the Book of Life. If we get too many "bad" marks in our files, we end up getting coal in our stocking----spending all of eternity in hell.

This kind of gate-keeping has its origins in the misunderstanding of scripture. In the Hebrew Bible, what we refer to as the Old Testament, there are many restrictions and requirements to enter the Temple----people had to be ritually clean to go in. This meant that they had to perform the necessary sacrifices and cleansings.

Staying clean meant not touching menstruating women or dead bodies. For the priests, it meant washing themselves in a very specific way before they could approach the altar.

And even the purest of the priests could not enter the Holy of Holies, the place where God was, more than once a year.

God is holy; we are sinners. And God cannot allow sin to come near to him. So we must keep our distance.

If we die in our sins, we cannot go to be with God.

This is still true. But sometimes this truth has been twisted to mean that we are saved only by being good.

This twisted up, God-knows-if-you've-been-bad-or-good way of thinking has been declared to be completely wrong. The Apostle Paul went on at length about what is called "justification by faith" and not by works. That means that we are saved by faith, by believing that Christ is our Lord and Savior, and not by any of our actions, no matter how good or bad we have been.

And Paul was not the only preacher of the Gospel to discredit the idea that we can earn our way into heaven.

Jesus Christ himself said it over and over---"Your faith has saved you." Not, "you've been good enough so you're saved." Not, "that one good deed outweighs all the bad things you've done, so congratulations, you're going to heaven!"

Your faith has saved you.

But this still seems to leave a problem.

If faith is enough to save us, what happens to the truth that we who are sinful cannot come into contact with God who is holy? Because even if we have faith enough to move mountains, we still might sin from time to time.

It's part of the human condition that we are not perfect.

So while we might be good enough according to Santa's list, we are still not holy enough to stand before God. And no amount of washing or ritual cleansing or faith can change that. Scripture tells us that we are all sinners, that not a single one of us is perfect.

So what should we do? Should we just give up hope? I don't think so.

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. Advent is the time in the church calendar when we prepare our hearts and souls to greet Christ when he comes again. It is a time of waiting, a time of making ourselves ready for Christmas, when Christ is born into our world once again.

What do we do to prepare? How do we get ready and stay ready?

That depends on what we are waiting for!

How do you envision Christ coming into our lives, into our world?

What does this mean to you, that we are getting ready for Christmas?

To many, many of us, getting ready for Christmas means decorating and baking and shopping and wrapping, and all of that has its place.

But while we are busy doing all of that, are we taking care of our hearts, minds, and souls? If Christ were to come again as a tiny baby, would we be too busy to even notice the Star shining in the night, or hear the angels singing?

If he were to come again on a cloud from heaven, would we be too preoccupied with checking things off of our to-do list to look up and notice?

If he were to come and knock on our door on Christmas Day, would the noise of our family celebration be so loud that we wouldn't even hear him?

How do we get ready? How do we wait?

I think it comes around again to the first question----how do we, as sinners, prepare ourselves to meet the holiness that is God face to face?

How do we make straight in the desert of our sin-filled lives a highway for the holiest of holies to walk among us, to touch us, to love us, to become human like us?

One way to answer that is to say that we need to make ourselves holy, to become as pure as we can, to become, as Jesus once said, "perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect."

By doing that, we would erase the difference --- the distance --- between us and God. There would be no more problem bringing together the sinful and the holy because we would be holy!

But that's too much like Santa moving us from the naughty list to the good list----we are earning our way into heaven!

Where is faith in that? Where is hope when there is no way that we can ever reach that goal. We are too weak. Too wounded. Too broken.

Too----human, to ever be holy and perfect.

There must be another way.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes,

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to what is good; ²²abstain from every form of evil.”

This sounds like a huge challenge---pray without ceasing! We have other things to think about, don't we? How can we do that?

Give thanks in all circumstances? Even the bad ones? Even when it seems that there is absolutely nothing to be thankful for?

But that's God's will for us, so that's what we need to try to do!

The next phrase gives us a clue about how to do that---“Do not quench the Spirit”

Maybe making excuses and thinking that there is no way to do these things is actually quenching the Spirit.

Instead, we should let the Holy Spirit do what God sent it to do----empower, strengthen, comfort and guide us---and remind us that we can do all things in Christ Jesus, who strengthens us.

“Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test them”---do those words bring us closer to God? Do they encourage us to be more holy, more perfect?

Prophets’ words can be challenging. In fact, that’s why prophets are called and anointed by God---to challenge people to return to the way of God.

“Hold fast to what is good and abstain from every kind of evil.”

Ah, we are back to the initial problem.

How can we who are imperfect be good and abstain from evil? Isn't it human nature to lose our grip on what is good, at least from time to time?

How can we abstain from evil? After all, we are sinful people, prone to evil, weak and tempted in many ways.

If we don't watch out, we end up on the naughty list, don't we?

By our own power we cannot make ourselves holy, and this is the difference between Santa Claus and God.

In our struggles to be holy and pure and good, God himself will help us---will give us the way to become clean enough to come into his presence.

Paul writes his prayer for us, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

We cannot do anything to sanctify ourselves, but God can and will!
And just in case we still have any doubts, Paul continues---

“The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. “

This is the assurance of things unseen, of things beyond our reach and power.

This is faith! And we are saved by faith!

Faith is more than belief. Faith is knowing that God is on our side, to bring us into relationship with him, for now and for all of eternity.

The prophet Isaiah said it a little differently. Listen to his words—

“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. “

We have been clothed with the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness, which have transformed us, filled us with joy and made us beautiful. Just as a bridegroom and a bride become beautiful as they celebrate their love for one another, we become beautiful at Christmastime as we celebrate God's love for us and our love for Jesus Christ!

The Lord God causes praise and righteousness to spring up from within us so that all nations can see it, and all we have to do is to recognize and acknowledge the gift that God has given to us in Christ Jesus!

Christ came and shared our human nature so that we might share his divine nature. This makes us holy enough, pure enough, to be in the presence of God.

So what do we need to do to get ready for Christmas?

God has prepared the way for us to come to him. The way is straight and the invitation is very real.

God acts, and we must respond.

Our response is to step out on that path, that highway that leads to God. Our response is to accept the invitation to the heavenly banquet, the feast of love and grace that is set before us.

Our response is to allow ourselves to be made holy by God, to choose to hold fast to what is good and abstain from evil.

Our response is to turn away from our sin and embrace Christ's love and forgiveness with all that we are.

Enter into the presence of God, and know that you are God's beloved children, and you will be ready for Christ our Lord and Savior to come!

Hallelujah! Amen!