

Mark 13:21-27
1 Corinthians 1:3-9

First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ
Sunday, November 30, 2008,
First Sunday in Advent

“Between Two Advents”

I wonder if some of you looked at the title of today’s sermon and thought, “Huh? What do you mean, two Advents?” I did not make up the phrase two Advents. In many ways, this is what Paul is describing in today’s Epistle lesson; and it is something to be explored.

It is a little surprising to read today’s Epistle in the context of the First Sunday in Advent, which is why I was drawn to it. Paul is almost always a challenge; and I am not one to turn down a Scriptural challenge, especially when it involves Paul. If you have not yet figured it out, I really enjoy reading and preaching about Paul and his letters. They are never easy; but, as I said, I enjoy his challenges. This passage seems to be a salutation and prayer of thanksgiving which is typical of the openings of most of Paul’s letters. When our attention as readers, though, focuses on the Advent season, the passage seems to take on a new depth.

It seems to be Paul’s habit to encourage and praise those with whom he works, and he makes no exception in this letter to the Corinthians. Even though Paul might write mainly a letter of scolding, he always begins with words of praise. We see Paul’s focus is on what God is doing in their lives. These words about what God calls them to become are a great source of encouragement as they deal with the heavy burden of their faults and shortcomings.

Paul makes several statements of thanksgiving for what God has done. Initially, we are the object of God's love and grace. Verse 4 says "The grace of God which was given to you." This refers to God's unmerited favor. So often in our sinful pride, we try to earn God's favor. But this is impossible to do. Behind our effort to try to impress God is the feeling that God will not love us the way we are. We feel this way because we live in a world of people who make us try to earn their love by conforming to their expectations for us. Since we tend to go through life auditioning for the love of others, it seems only normal that we would have to do the same thing with God. The greatest discovery in life, according to Kenneth Chafin, a Biblical scholar, is that nothing in our minds or hearts or action is hidden from God, and He still loves us!

Next, Christ brings us spiritual riches. When Paul writes in verse 5 that "you were enriched in everything by Him," Paul is following a Biblical tradition of speaking of the relationship between God and man in terms of wealth and riches.

The themes of spiritual bankruptcy and spiritual wealth are very prominent in the Bible, and for good reason. Those to whom Paul writes this letter live in a society which produces great material wealth which, in turn, creates spiritually bankrupt people. In a society which thinks about nothing much other than making money and having fun, there is a constant deterioration in the quality of life. The worth of self and of other people decreases while the quality of relationships deteriorates. Soon the differences between right and wrong fade and values become distorted; social pressure toward evil can

emerge. This is the mood and pattern of life in first-century Corinth. It is also a fairly accurate description of many places in the world today.

Paul's claim is that in a world of such spiritual poverty and hunger, Christ enriches the lives of those to whom Paul is writing. Paul is not making a comparison between what people are and what people ought to be. Instead, Paul is thinking about the kind of people they are and the kind of lives they may have lived before Christ came into their lives. The life which grasps the truth of God is rich indeed.

Next, God gives us great potential. In this thanksgiving section, Paul thanks God for the gifts the Corinthians are given. He tries to encourage the Corinthians with the realization that God does not hold back any gifts which may help them to do His work and to be His church in Corinth. Paul wants them to see they receive special gifts because they accept Jesus Christ as their Lord. One of the great insights of the Scriptures of which we want to be aware and to claim, is God is already giving us the gifts we need to do His will.

Mr. Chafin relates he was the guest preacher at a church in Richmond, VA. The church was located in a community which, like many others, had deteriorated over the years. While there, he met with the lay leadership to hear and discuss their concerns. Mr. Chafin expressed appreciation for the positive things the church was doing. Then he asked about special dreams they had for the future and what they would like the church to do in the name of Christ that it had not done before.

Several people responded and said they wanted their church to minister creatively to the needs of the people in their neighborhood, to reach out in love to them as people for whom Christ died. There was lengthy discussion, including suggestions for fulfilling their mission. Mr. Chafin indicates he was impressed with the thought that these people already had the gifts and abilities needed to fulfill their dreams. All they needed was the assurance they could and that God would lead and guide them all the way.

Great untapped resources, whether in Corinth or in the church of the 21st century, are in the gifts God gives to His people.

God gives us a basis of hope. Even in his greeting, Paul reminds his friends in Corinth of the ultimate hope they have in Christ Jesus. He reminds us as well. It seems strange to find a reference to the Second Coming of Christ right here in the opening words in his greeting. What Paul seems to do is to set the problems which the Corinthians now face in the context of eternity. Paul wants them to be “blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. As the basis of hope, Paul emphasizes the fact that God is faithful. It is easy to get so bogged down in today’s failures that we lose sight of the ultimate victory we have in Jesus Christ.

As Christians in today’s world, we already have an idea about how things in our lives are going to turn out; we know what is in our last chapter in our book of life; and this means we can live in the present with confidence. Paul seems to want to assure the Corinthians right in the beginning that their future is as secure as the promises of God.

There is a kind of spiritual hand-wringing which suggests that those who engage in it think they are involved in a lost cause. The hope of the Christian is based on the activity of God and allows us to believe that, whatever may be the circumstances, there will come a day when life will overcome death, when love will overcome hate, when good will overcome evil, and the kingdom of God will triumph over the kingdoms of the world. It is the assurance of this future which allows us to live more triumphantly in the present.

In the heart of this passage, Paul's affirmation of assurance is very strong. The Corinthians' experience of God's enrichment of them "in every way" is already a confirmation of the testimony about Christ which causes their faith to begin with. Their response is positive proof of God's calling. But it is only the beginning of their story. From this point of their being called and confirmed in their faith, Paul looks forward to the goal toward which God's grace is moving them – namely, the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul's thanksgiving reminds the Corinthians of how richly they are graced by God and of how God is faithful to follow through on His promises.

Paul's text affirms our current lives are lived between Advents. Jesus has come once, and the divine generosity has been given in Him. This passage gives special attention to His Second Advent, for which Christians wait. The present is an in-between time.

Paul's images are rich. We live between hiddenness and revelation. Indistinctly and in partial glimpses, we grasp Christ's presence with us now. We are not gifted with 20/20 vision to perceive all we would like to see; and

therefore, we live in anticipation of a full disclosure of Christ and His purposes. The crucified Christ, who can be a stumbling block to some, will then become visible. The time of His coming will become daylight rather than darkness.

We also live between guilt and blamelessness. Our own failures and our participation in a social system which oppresses and destroys many of God's creatures leave us depressed. We are only too aware we fall short of the divine intentions God has for us. Yet we find it difficult, if not impossible, to go beyond whom we are and what we continually do on our own. The prospect of an impending judgment leaves us helpless and exposed, except for this promise that we will be continually sustained so that we may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. The plans God makes for us are good plans not evil, and His promises set us free.

The time between the Advents is a time of transition, full of uncertainties. It is likely the Corinthians themselves denied their inbetweenness and thought they were already at the end of the tunnel. They may have interpreted God's gifts to them as evidence of their full salvation. Paul, then, continually keeps before them the Christ who has not yet returned and concludes his letter with the *marana tha* prayer, Our Lord, Come!

For others caught in the despair of their own circumstances, however, there seems to be a need for reassurance about the future, a re-hearing of God's promise of the Second Advent. These people seem to deny their inbetweenness by denying the future. They may need to discover again

there is a light at the end of the tunnel. This First Sunday in Advent becomes an opportunity to allow the text to speak to all of us.

Another of Paul's affirmations in the text is that God's gifts are more than enough for these in-between times. Paul is overly demonstrative in describing the benefits God gives the Corinthians: "In every way you have been enriched in Him, in speech and knowledge of every kind;" and "you are not lacking in any spiritual gifts."

When thinking of this in-between time, the key statement is, "God is faithful." God is not fickle; God is not gracious one minute and angry the next. God calls us into a unique, participatory community with Jesus Christ. With this calling comes the promise "He will strengthen you to the end." God is faithful and can be trusted.

Paul's third affirmation is that the text demonstrates a genuine unity within the faith community. Paul's prayer of thanksgiving takes on an added dimension when we look beyond the boundaries of the text into the body of the letter. All the spiritual gifts God gives to the Corinthians are not only for their own personal enrichment; they are also to lead to a common unity of mind and purpose.

It becomes an appropriate appeal since these spiritual gifts Paul writes about have led to splits, squabbles, and bitterness within the faith community. Paul reminds the Corinthians that although they are gifted in speech and knowledge of every kind, the power of the gospel comes through Jesus Christ and the power of the Cross.

The time in between Advents is not a time to be passive or to pursue selfish goals. It is a time for using God's divine gifts in building up our larger faith community. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians speaks about forsaking rights, of attending to our weaker sisters and brothers, of a worship which benefits the entire congregation, and of love which "does not insist on its own way." According to Paul, and Charles Cousar, a Biblical scholar, these are the ingredients which make up unity and which characterize the people who are called into the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Because believers are totally dependent on God's transforming grace for their new lives in Christ, their basic response is one of thankfulness to God. Paul expects thankfulness to God from all persons, and he models this thankfulness himself. Paul's relationship to other believers and his thankfulness to God is not based on whether Paul likes them or on whether they view issues in the world in the same way. Paul's relationship to believers is based on the simple and profound fact that God's grace is active in them and in him. Our modern Christian community is founded on God's grace given to all. It is not founded on whether we are socially compatible nor is it founded on whether we share the same political views.

Our lives in Christ are never just our own but always involve how we relate to those around us. Our life in Christ is not visible simply by a change in our attitude. Our life in Christ is evidenced in the difference in how we make choices and decisions, the difference in the actions we take, and the way we treat both ourselves and others. Christ empowers and enables us to use our spiritual gifts and riches to demonstrate the unity of our faith community and to wait with assurance for the Advent of the Second Coming

of Christ. May we each use this time between the Advent of over two thousand years ago and the Advent for which we anxiously await the Second Coming of our Lord and Savior to use our spiritual gifts, wealth, and opportunities to bring others to know the Christ we know and the God we know. May we also use this time to reach out to others around us and to minister to them as Christ shows us and to live out the Great Commandments as Christ encourages us. May we be renewed as we live between the two Advents. Amen.