

Pastor Chris Matthis
Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Advent 1, Series C
Saturday, December 1st, 2018
Sunday, December 2nd, 2018

Sermon: Facing Advent¹

Text: 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Focus: When Christ returns in glory on the Last Day, we will see him face to face.

Function: That they would live in holiness and joyful expectation of Christ's Second Advent.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "He will come again with glory..." (Nicene Creed).

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen. Listen again to Paul's words from his letter to the Thessalonians:

"For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God, as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith?" (1 Thess. 3:9-10, ESV).²

Paul was a pastor who—like most pastors—loved his people and missed their presence. That much is certain. But Paul was separated from the Thessalonians by persecution and geography. He'd just received a glowing report from Timothy about the Thessalonians' strong Christian faith and love (1 Thess. 3:6). Timothy's report comforted Paul in his trials since nothing warms your heart like good news from old friends (1 Thess. 3:7). Paul's heart overflowed in prayer and thanksgiving for the Thessalonians and their faith (1 Thess. 3:10; cp. 1:2).

But that still wasn't as good as seeing them face to face. Paul prayed night and day for his friends, asking God to allow him to visit them so he could teach them—that is, supply what was lacking in their faith (1 Thess. 3:10-11). When Paul first planted the church in Thessalonica, he didn't get to spend a lot of time there. After just three weeks, an angry mob violently drove

¹ This is an abbreviated version of a sermon originally preached December 2nd, 2012, at Epiphany Lutheran Church.

² All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

them out of the city (Acts 17:1-9). In his absence, Paul worried about the Thessalonians' newfound faith (they were baby Christians) and wondered how their church was doing. Three weeks was not nearly enough time to teach even the *basics* of the Christian faith. (Paul spent as much as three months, 18 months, or 2 *years* in other cities where he planted churches; in stark contrast, the Thessalonians only got three *weeks*!)

Yet three weeks was plenty of time for Paul to fall in love with the people of Thessalonica. "We give thanks to God always for all of you," he wrote, "constantly mentioning you in our prayers" (1 Thess. 1:2). And "we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you *face to face* and supply what is lacking in your faith" (3:10). The thing Paul most wanted to teach them was about Jesus' Second Coming, the doctrine they understood the least and worried about the most (cp. 4:13-5:11). When you read elsewhere in the Thessalonian correspondence, you realize that they were worried Jesus had already come back and they'd been "left behind," so to speak. Paul wrote to assure them that, yes, indeed, Jesus was coming back soon—but it hadn't happened *yet*. This kind of teaching is best done in person, but because of the danger and distance, Paul had to write and send his love instead.

Many of us can appreciate Paul's situation. We are familiar with painful separation from family and friends and the experience of longing to see them face to face. These separations are caused by long-distance dating relationships, military service overseas, traveling for work, or simply an "empty nest." I've met a lot of mothers who struggle with depression when their kids go off to college (dads are probably sad too, but they don't wear their hearts on their sleeves as much). Some of our members have sons, husbands, or fathers serving active duty in the military. At night they worry about them and wonder if they're okay. Others travel so much for business

that they're more familiar with the inside of a hotel room than their own living rooms. Nobody asks for this, of course, but sometimes it's just the way it goes.

But distance isn't the only thing that keeps us apart from the ones we love. Sin also causes separation. Friendships fall apart because of jealousy and misunderstanding. Some of you have loved ones who've served time in jail for crimes they committed, and during their incarceration you missed them terribly. Divorce tears families apart and teaches kids hard lessons about custody battles and flights as unaccompanied minors. Abuse of all kinds leads to family dysfunction as battered spouses and children lick their wounds in loneliness and silence. People can live in the same house and yet be light-years away from one another.

No matter what kind of separation you face, the worst kind is spiritual separation from God. Sin gets in the way of our relationship with God and makes us feel lonely and afraid. Before Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they walked with him in the Garden and talked with him face to face. But after they ate the forbidden fruit, their relationship soured. They hid from his face in fear. So God drove them out of Paradise and into the ruined world east of Eden. And east of Eden is where we've lived ever since—cut off from God and separated from his sight. No longer can unforgiven, sinful human beings stand in the presence of a holy God without being destroyed. As God told Moses, "You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live" (Ex. 33:20).

But as much as our separation from God caused us terror and pain, it was even more unbearable for God. He loves us and craves relationship with his children. So God took the first step towards reconciliation when he sent his Son Jesus to us in human flesh. In Jesus, God put a face on! Jesus "is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). We see God in him. In the face of Christ, humanity finally found favor and forgiveness in God's sight. With compassionate

eyes, our loving Lord went to the cross, weeping over our brokenness and crying out, “*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt. 27:46). It was in the terror and loneliness of separation from God that Jesus breathed his last, gave up his ghost, and died for your salvation... and mine.

But God the Father did not abandon Jesus to death. On the third day, he raised him from the dead. Now Jesus lives and reigns for all eternity. He ascended into heaven, and someday he will return. The Good News of Advent is that Christ will come again. Four times in Revelation, Christ declares, “I am coming soon” (Rev. 3:11). “Behold, I *am* coming soon...” (Rev. 22:7). “I am coming *soon!*” (Rev. 22:12). “Surely, I am coming soon...” (Rev. 22:20). At Christ’s return, we will look on the one we pierced (Zech. 12:10), and we will see him face to face (Rev. 22:4). Then he will dwell with us forever. “When he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2b).

Until that day, Christ does not leave us as orphans (John 14:8). Rather, he comes to us in the face of our needy neighbors. In Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, the faithful are surprised to discover that they had clothed Jesus when he was naked, fed him when he was hungry, and visited him when he was in prison. “But when and how did we do these things?” they ask. To which Jesus answers, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matt. 25:40). In other words, if we want to see Jesus’ face, we need look no further than the faces of the people around us, whom God has placed in our lives to be loved and served by us. You cannot love God, whom you have not seen, if you don’t love your brother, whom you *do* see (1 John 4:20). Until the Last Day, Christ wears the face of our needy neighbor as a mask. We see God in Christ, and Christ in our fellow human beings.

That's why Paul wrote to the Thessalonians—so they would grow in their love for one another and all people and live holy lives, pleasing to God, as they awaited the coming of our Lord Jesus (1 Thess. 3:11-12). When Jesus finally appears, his face will be unmistakably recognizable by all people. Until then, we see God's face in the most unexpected places: in the manger, on the cross, and in the face of our neighbor. *Maranatha!* "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20; cp. 2 Pet. 3:11-12). Amen.