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## Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, November 29, 2009

### **Never the Same: When the Word Changes You *When the Lord Jesus Comes***

I Thessalonians 3:6-13

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh, Senior Pastor

Today is the official beginning of the Christmas season in the life of the church. It is called Advent. What is Advent? Advent serves as a dual reminder of the original expectant waiting and preparation for the celebration of the nativity of Jesus as well as the second coming of Christ. Advent: the arrival, coming and discovery of something extremely important. The prophet Isaiah writes, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end.”<sup>1</sup>

As followers of Jesus, we believe in someone who has arrived, someone who will come again and something extremely important. We exist to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ and him alone; nurture and equip followers of Jesus for the work of ministry; worship God with our whole mind, body and spirit; preserve the truth; promote justice while serving the marginalized in society; and demonstrate the kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. As followers of Jesus, we live his mission, the mission of loving the enemy and telling the good news of Jesus Christ to all in word and deed. Remember, Advent is the arrival, coming and discovery of something extremely important. Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Isaiah 9:6-7

<sup>2</sup>Luke 4:18-19

Jesus' message leads us intentionally to engage the city, region and world. Advent compels us to be missional. As missional people, we are entrusted with the simple gospel and understand our primary identity is that of witness. Jesus Christ came into the world not to condemn it but to save it. We are driven by love for the lost and a desire to incarnate the good news of the kingdom of God in homes, neighborhoods, places of work and the community. Once again, Advent is the arrival, coming and discovery of something extremely important. The apostle Paul writes, "For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever."<sup>3</sup>

As followers of Jesus, we proclaim the larger story of God's love and purposes as the only hope for meaning in our world. We seek to demonstrate the gospel of the kingdom of God, thus fulfilling both the Great Commandment and Great Commission. We are faithful to the mission of Jesus until he returns again.

We are not only individual followers of Jesus. We are a community of followers known as Eastminster Presbyterian Church. Being the best Jesus someone will see and being church is about being a person and church that is vibrant, growing and actively engaged in the world. Advent is about Jesus' birth, his mission and his second coming. Inherent in Advent is the idea of a living, breathing and growing person and church.

For as long as I can remember, I've heard people complain that Christmas is too commercial. Even in the movie *A Miracle on 34th Street*, which was filmed more than 50 years ago, one of the characters complains that most people are too caught up in the material aspect of the holiday. It has probably always been this way.

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<sup>3</sup>1 Thessalonians 4:16-17

Does Advent matter to you? Will your celebration of Christmas be any different because of Jesus' birth, mission and his second coming? Today, I am convicted to challenge each one of us to connect with the simple message of Advent and examine our lives in light of that message. Advent is about a relationship. And that relationship should inform all of our relationships. Let me explain.

To accomplish my articulated agenda, I will talk specifically about connecting with the people in our spheres of influence. If you want to get the most out of this Christmas, then forget for awhile what you need to buy and what you need to do and spend some time focusing on the people you will be seeing during the days and weeks from this moment forward leading up to Christmas day.

Today we're looking at a passage of Scripture that offers some suggestions on how to connect on a deeper level with the people in our lives. The text will assist each of us to be a living, breathing and growing person who is part of a living, breathing and growing church. Our text is from a letter written by Paul to the church in Thessalonica. They were a group of believers whom Paul loved very much. In this letter, he pours out his heart to them. Timothy's brief visit to the church in Thessalonica had brought him great satisfaction. As Timothy told them of Paul's affectionate longing to see them again, they replied, "Tell him that we remember him with great affection and are eager to see him as he is to see us." When Timothy rejoined Paul and brought them this news, Paul was relieved and filled with joy. Paul's joy overflowed in renewed thanksgiving to God. While the Thessalonian believers were tested by persecution, they still needed encouragement. They needed further instruction in Christian ethics and doctrine. The holiness which Paul desired to see in the lives of the Thessalonians was in practice, likeness to Christ; a likeness to be produced increasingly within them by the Spirit whom they have received. The reference to the Advent of the Lord Jesus was especially appropriate because their entering into his manifested glory then would consummate their present growth in holiness.

The same way that Paul shared his heart with that group of Christians in Thessalonica is the way we need to share our hearts with the people in our lives. In 1 Thessalonians 3:6-13, these eight verses

depict a Christmas list three lists, actually that we can make for our family, friends, neighbors and co-workers, those people in our spheres of influence.

First, make a list of the people in your life who are in your spheres of influence: your wife, your husband, your children, your parents, your brothers and sisters, your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors and others. Take the time to make this list at some point today or tomorrow. Once the list is completed do two things: thank God for bringing those people into your life and then tell each of them how much they mean to you. This is what Paul did. In verses 6-9, Paul lifts up this application, “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of God because of you?”<sup>4</sup> Paul was grateful for his relationship to the believers in Thessalonica and he expressed his gratitude to God and his appreciation to them. He took the time to say, “Thank you...I appreciate you...you fill my life with joy.” Quoting Augustine, “This is why I am admonishing and urging you in the Lord to think lightly, my brothers and sisters, of things present, which you can’t carry with you when you die. Be on guard against sin, on your guard against injustice of all sorts, on your guard against worldly appetites and greed. It is only then, you see, that our profit from you is undiminished and our reward full of joy in the Lord.”<sup>5</sup> Gratitude matters in your relationships.

Second, make a list of intangible gifts you can give to each one. Paul writes in verse 10, “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.” Paul wanted to meet with his friends in Thessalonica and build up their faith. He knew at that particular time that was what they needed most. As you think of the people in your spheres of influence, take time to think about something you can give to each one; something they really need. I’m not talking about a material gift. I’m talking about something much more personal; something non-material...something intangible. There is something you can give to each one on your list; a word of encouragement, a smile, a hug, a pep-talk, an apology, a compliment. Ask yourself, “What does this person need most? What can I say to or do for them? On the topic that the truth of the Christian faith is personally taught, again

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<sup>4</sup>1 Thessalonians 3:9

Augustine writes, “But every discourse on this topic, where one’s goal is that what is said may not only be believed but also understood and known, is burdensome for those still spiritually immature...Having the desire to transmit some degree of truth to understandings not capable of a secure grasp, they take care to transmit these in a way that does not cause their discourse to be regarded with disdain and the truth contained therein to be completely ignored.”<sup>6</sup> Truthful words and actions matter in your relationships.

Third, make a “wish list” for each person and share that list with them. I use the term “wish list,” I really mean a prayer list. This is what Paul did for the Thessalonians. He writes in verse 11-13, “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.” Paul is saying, “What I want for you, dear friends, is that you grow in love, strength and holiness. Be ready when the Lord comes.” Think of the people on your list. What do you want for each one? Obviously, you want what is best for them. Just by telling them this, you will strengthen and encourage them. God’s love for us is always first. Once again Augustine writes, “Suppose we first loved God so as to merit his love in return. Then wouldn’t we first choose him so as to merit our being chosen by him? There would be no merit in men’s choosing him unless the action of God’s grace in choosing them had gone before. He who gave this blessing to love one another is the same who gave us the love to love one another.”<sup>7</sup> Choosing to love first as God chose to love you first before you loved him matters in your relationships.

When you write your list, look at the people God has placed in your life. These are the people in your spheres of influence. They will be an integral part of your Christmas this year. How you relate to them will determine what kind of Christmas you have. If you want to have a great Christmas; if you want to go beyond all the holiday hype and experience the joy of Christmas, then make an effort to connect on

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<sup>5</sup>Augustine, *Sermons* 359.9.

<sup>6</sup>Augustine, *Tractates on John* 98.5.1.

<sup>7</sup>Augustine, *Grace and Free Will*, 38.

a deeper level with the people in your spheres of influence. Take the opportunity this Advent season to tell them what they mean to you and give thanks to God for them.

Now, there is an underlying premise in all that I have shared with you this morning, which is gleaned from our text. Paul wrote this letter to believers in Jesus Christ. All that I have outlined regarding how to connect at a deeper level with the people in your spheres of influence have as a common denominator that all are followers of Jesus Christ. But, we all know that is not the case. Not everyone in our spheres of influence has professed their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. That's reality. And that is reality for this final instruction. And it comes by way of a question. Do you have a burden for those in your spheres of influence to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord? You see, it is this connection, this relationship with Jesus that matters most of all.

One of the greatest gifts God has given us is each other, those people in our spheres of influence; family, friends, neighbors, coworkers and others. Let's enjoy these gifts. Let's celebrate the joy of our relationships. But let us also share the joy of knowing Jesus with those who may not know that joy for themselves. Yes, God came to earth in the form of a man. This man was Jesus. Yes, Jesus had a mission, a mission of showing the way to be reconciled with the Father, the creator of all of life. Yes, Jesus will return again. At Jesus' second coming, the final Judgment will take place. At Jesus' second coming, the new heaven and new earth will be established. At that time, there will be no more opportunities to connect with the people in our spheres of influence about the relationship which matters the most. Advent: the arrival, coming and discovery of something extremely important. Let us pray!

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