

AWAITING THE ALREADY
Advent Worship Series – Week 5
Paul’s Christmas Letter
December 27, 2020
A Christmas Letter

Call to Worship: [Ask visiting volunteers to be Readers 1 and 2.]

Reader 1: The weeks leading up to Christmas hardly ever pass by without receiving at least one Christmas letter from a friend or loved one. Perhaps you even sent one yourself this year. Perhaps it is natural for this kind of year-in-review correspondence to take place around Christmas, as it is so close to the end of the calendar year.

Reader 2: Theologically, the meaning is even more significant. The act of God’s Incarnation into the world through Jesus marked a pivotal moment in the history of the world.

Reader 1: The Christmas story is one whose pages are well worn, whose words echo from prior retellings. But every time we hear it, it is a different story because *we have changed*. Much has happened in the twelve months since our last journey to Bethlehem.

Reader 2: We have experienced the triumphant highs of life stage celebrations, achievements, rewards, and accomplishments. Our year has been sprinkled with birthday cakes, wedding flowers, diplomas, ribbons, and cheers.

Reader 1: But it has also seen its share of sorrows: the somber solace of a graveside, the chilling words of a doctor’s diagnosis, the bitter tears of a broken relationship, the dark shadows of guilt over the past, or fear about the future.

Reader 2: So there is something poignant in reading about the birth of Christ with a Christmas letter in hand. Reminiscing over the lives of your family and friends—and even your own life—in the context of Christmas reminds us that this very thing that God did long ago is still happening today.

Reader 1: The reality of the Incarnation is both constant and adaptable, offering a fresh word for today as a hinge between your past and your future.

(*Awaiting the Already*, pp. 81-83)

Awaiting the Already

Responsive Reading: [*Ask visiting volunteers to be Readers 1 and 2.*]

Reader 1: The book of Titus offers for us the closest thing to a Christmas letter the apostle Paul can give us. Titus offers words of encouragement, instruction, and admonition to the leaders of the early church.

Reader 2: As we read a passage from Titus, listen for its meaning in the context of Christmas and our Advent journey together. Notice how these words not only speak of the past, but also the future; of Christ's Incarnation, but also his Second Coming.

All: ¹¹The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people. ¹²It educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world. ¹³At the same time we wait for the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and savior Jesus Christ. (Titus 2:11-13, CEB)

Reader 1: "The grace of God ***has appeared.***" It begins in the past, celebrating the Incarnation of Christ that has brought salvation to the world. It is the history of our salvation in a six-word summary. That one sentence captures all that God has done prior to and including the arrival of Jesus: the creation of the world; the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David; the care for the Israelites in exile; and beyond. And at the very moment Jesus was born into the world, God fulfilled the promise of a redeemer.

Reader 2: ***The grace of God***—the undeserved, unmerited gift of salvation and redemption for the world—***has appeared***—it is a done deal, unnecessary to be repeated, imitated, or supplemented.

Reader 1: Paul is saying, "Church, here is your year-in-review." Here is all that God has been busy doing not just in the past twelve months, but since the beginning of time. You can almost hear Paul thinking to himself as he writes: "My goodness, God's been busy!"

Reader 2: But then, notice the change of focus at the end of the passage:

All: “At the same time ***we wait*** for the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”

Reader 1: Not all Christmas letters from family and friends contain a section about “things we are looking forward to in the upcoming year,” but Paul’s certainly does. Where he uses only six words to describe the past, his words flow out one after another as he describes the future. It’s as if he can hardly contain his anticipation for what he knows still lies ahead. If you think Jesus coming as a baby was amazing, then wait until you see ***the blessed hope and the glorious appearance of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.***

Reader 2: In this passage, we have both the past and the future, embodied in a Jesus who has appeared and will come again. And this, of course, brings us all the way back to the very premise of our Advent journey in this book. It there ever was an Epistle that captured *AWAITING THE ALREADY*, summarizing those same inherent tensions that we have discovered in all four Gospels, it would be this one.

Reader 1: We are awaiting the arrival of a Jesus who is already here.

Reader 2: How is it that Titus suggests we await the already? How is it that we are to live in the present moment, in the meantime that stands between the Incarnation and the Second Coming? Well, this passage makes it pretty clear by providing the answer right between the bookends of the passage.

All: “[The grace of God] educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and the desires of this world.” (Titus 2:12)

Reader 2: Paul captures it beautifully with three simple words that ought to characterize the life of every follower of Jesus. Our enduring take is to pursue holiness in the present moment, marked by a life that is ***sensible, ethical,*** and ***godly.*** Notice that these three words together capture the full range of the spiritual life.

(*Awaiting the Already*, pp. 83-86)

Time of Prayer: [Ask visiting volunteers to read these prayers.]

Prayer #1: Holy God, you came to us in humility and servanthood. You bound yourself to the confines of a human body to experience all that we experience, to teach us, to wash our feet and forgive our sins. You will make us like yourself if only we are not too self-loving to ask. You look for the lowly, teachable spirit on whom you can shower your grace. I pray that you will find what you are looking for in me.

(Praise & Worship Bible, p. 984)

Prayer #2: Lord Jesus, we come with praise and thanksgiving for the marvel and miracle of your birth that we celebrate this season. Come once again to us this hour that we may rejoice because you have been born in our hearts. We pray that in all our labors, in all our relationships, in all of our life, you will live and love through us, in all our seasons of life, as our Savior and Lord. In your name, we pray.

(Colonel Henry Gariepy)

Prayer #3: Lord, your people waited a long time for your deliverance. But your word is true and at last you came with an anointing of truth and power that has lasted to this day. Still you bind up our broken hearts and deliver us from our sinful bondage. You comfort us and fill us with joy. You restore our losses and give us new purpose and hope. Now we worship and wait once more with faith for you to come again in power and glory. Amen.

(The NIV Worship Bible, p. 990)

Benediction: *[Congregational prayer, please print in bulletin.]*

Gracious and eternal God, we thank you for what you have done in the past, and what you will do in the future. As our Advent journey draws to a close, grant us fitness of mind, disciplined behavior, and a passionate spirit to worship you in every present moment. Amen.

(Awaiting the Already, p. 96)

AWAITING THE ALREADY
Advent Sermon – Week 5
Paul's Christmas Letter
December 27, 2020

By Lt. Colonel Paul D. Smith

Title: *Living Christmas Letters*

Scripture: Titus 2:11-14

Introduction:

- A. How many of you have written or received a Christmas letter this year? I don't know when it started, but someone probably decided just sending a Christmas card wasn't personal enough and so they started adding all that happened in the past year. Some are very creative, others are humorous, still others are poetic. [*Personal illustration:*] My mother-in-law was known for her poetic Christmas letters.

- B. News program often feature a "year in review." If we think about it theologically, reviewing the past may be even more significant. God's gift of Jesus' Incarnation was a pivotal moment in history. All the events leading up to, and after Christ's birth are impacted by that miraculous moment when the eternal Word became flesh. "O Come All Ye Faithful" – "*Word of the Father*" – God the Son, the Word who was active in Creation enters our world and brings new words: Peace, Joy and Reconciliation. These words ring especially strong for those of us who have accepted the gift of Emmanuel.

- C. But we are not to live in the past. Paul's letter reminds us that we are living in the time between Christ's first coming as the child of Bethlehem and His return. Take a look at Titus 2 which was read earlier. This letter from Paul offers instructions on how we should live as those who have personally received God's gift of Jesus.

- D. Imagine Paul's letter to Titus similar to those you've received from your family and friends.
 - Abraham looking up at the stars in wonder after hearing that his descendants would outnumber the stars
 - David strumming his harp composing a song of God's care as he watches his father's sheep
 - The manger, fulfilling all of God's promises.

- E. In this "in between time," how does Paul suggest we live in the present as we wait? We find it tucked in the middle of the passage (v. 12): "It (God's Grace) educates us so that we can live sensible, ethical, and godly lives right now by rejecting ungodly lives and desires of this world."

- F. Paul uses those three simple words to beautifully characterize what should be the lifestyle of every follower of Jesus. Our task in pursuing holiness in the present

moment is marked by a life that is *sensible, ethical* and *godly*. Each of the terms is essentially pointing to a life that is in harmony – with ourselves, with others and with God. Paul reminds us that every relationship we have deserves our fullest commitment to love and reconciliation.

- G. We can't experience the peace and joy we sing about at Christmas while we're in conflict with others, God or with yourself. Reconciling ourselves to others and to God is one of the chief ways we can live, awaiting the already. So let's look for a few moments at the three words Paul uses in Titus 2.

1. The Sensible Life

A. When we use the word "sensible," you might think of wisdom and common sense.

- It's sensible to keep your car filled with gas rather than letting it run to empty.
- It's sensible to wear sunscreen when you're going to the beach.
- It's sensible to keep your eye on the clock when you have a cake in the oven.

To some degree, that's a good way to consider the word sensible as well. By living sensibly, we won't get stranded, sunburned or eating burned cake.

B. But the word "sensible" in Greek goes beyond just living wisely.

- That word can also be translated as "sober" or "self-controlled."
- "Discipline" and "restraint" are also contained in the word.
- To live sensibly means to have our lives in balance, and moderation in all things.
- A sensible life seems to run counter to our society which seems obsessed with excess.
 - Remember Black Friday, Cyber Monday and Super Saturday? On those days, few individuals exercise restraint and most companies encourage us to throw self-control to the wind in a spending frenzy.
 - Paul called his readers to a better way of life than the culture in which they lived, and that principle holds for us as well.

C. Ironically, a sensible life was also an ideal of the Greco-Roman world.

- Self-Control or temperance was one of the four cardinal virtues of Greek philosophy, along with justice, prudence and courage.
- By using the word sensible, Paul was reminding his readers to adopt a lifestyle that even non-believers would recognize as virtuous.

D. The sensible life is one we can achieve because of the "grace which has already appeared" (v. 11).

- The gift of salvation in Christ Jesus educates us so we can live sensibly.
- Philosophers saw self-control as a virtue to strive for, but Paul says it is a gift from God.
 - This way of living is the means to find inner harmony despite the inner war within us.
 - The self-controlled life helps curb our urges which are not pleasing to God, keeping them from running wild in our hearts.
 - Self-control is the mark of a life restored by the God's Grace. It isn't enough to live in harmony with our ourselves.

Paul goes on to say the Grace which has already appeared educated us to live the....

2. The ethical life

- A. We also need to live in the same way with people around us.
- Living ethically means living together according to mutually shared values and principles, so that everyone within the community have common definitions for right and wrong, moral and immoral, just and unjust.
 - Paul's basis of ethics in the Christian Community is found in the Greek word we translate as ethical, which can also be translated as "upright," "just," or righteous.
 - The ability to live ethically is based in God's righteousness. We are to live according to Christ's teaching and the rules he lays out in Titus and his other pastoral letters.
 - To live at peace with one another, we must do the right thing, embody the way and example of Jesus.
 - However, living ethically can be costly. It means living according to the standards of love, generosity and self-sacrifice rather than our own selfish agendas.
- B. If living sensibly means living with a redeemed inner life, living ethically means living with redeemed behavior towards others.
- It means aligning our actions according to God's will. The ability to live an ethical, righteous life is also a gift flowing from God's Grace – which has appeared in Jesus – so that we are empowered to live in harmony with others.

Illustration:

- C. Paul isn't the only New Testament writer to use the word ethical or righteous. The Gospel writers used the same word referring to some of the people we associate with Christmas and the ministry of Jesus.
- In Matthew 1:19, Joseph is referred to as a "righteous man". He planned to send Mary away privately when he learned of her pregnancy, because he didn't want to humiliate her.
 - His plan was justifiable—even ethical—according to the standards of his culture.
 - But Joseph's righteousness was based on God's standard. And when the angel told him that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, Joseph's choice was clear, though difficult. Joseph married Mary.
 - In Luke 1:16, Zechariah and Elizabeth were both described as righteous before God, blameless in their observance of all the Lord's commandments and regulations.
 - When their son was born, their family pressured them to name him after Zechariah, which was the custom. However, they followed God's command and named him John.
- D. The concept of righteous living is central not only in Paul's letters and in the lives of several Advent characters, but it is also the key ingredient for us to faithfully live in the present between Christ's Incarnation and His second coming.

3. The Godly Life

- A. Paul says God's grace, which has already appeared with the birth of Christ, helps us live godly lives.
- Without complete devotion to God, we can't live at peace with ourselves through living a sensible life, or with others through living an ethical life.
 - A Godly life is the linchpin that makes the other two possible. It focuses our attention and prioritizes all of the other aspects of our lives with God.
- B. The Greek word we translate as "godly" is also closely related to words "devout" and "to worship."
- To live a godly life doesn't mean honoring God because the Law requires it.
 - The godly life is a life characterized by worship - constantly offering God worship, praise, honor and glory to God through every aspect of our lives.
- C. When we use the word godly, we also don't mean divine.
- There is only one God (and it isn't you or me).
 - "Godly" doesn't mean "perfect" either, because we all know our imperfections.
 - While living a godly life is beyond our abilities, it is possible because of God's grace which has already appeared in the person of Christ Jesus.

Illustration:

While none of the people surrounding Jesus in the Advent and Christmas stories are described as godly, there are two in Acts 10 who are. The first is Cornelius, and the second is his soldier, who are both described as "devout." This part of the story takes place shortly after Peter's vision of the sheet descending when God instructed Peter to extend the message across cultural and ethnic boundaries. Cornelius receives a vision from God which corresponded to Peter's in a completely different city. What is significant is neither Cornelius nor the soldier he sends to speak to Peter are Jews. Cornelius and his household become the first gentile converts to Christianity.

Godly living means not only offering good worship to God as a manner of life, but also being open to be used by God to share the message of Christ to those in need. After all, the heart of the Christmas message is that Christ himself, being godly in the purest sense, came into the world to become the very means through which all of us who are separated from God by our sin – can have that relationship restored. To be a people of Advent means that we share in the same task: to be living Christmas letters – proclaiming God's Grace, pointing people toward a transforming experience with God, so that they might become godly people themselves and continue the cycle of Grace.

[*Personal illustration:*] I mentioned earlier my mother-in-law, Lt. Colonel Ruth Bonifield was known for her Christmas poems and letters. In closing I want to share one she wrote in 2010:

It's a Boy

"It's a boy!" The women uttered,
Mary knew it all the time.
"What will you name him?" Asked the women.
"JESUS" Mary smiled sublime.
She wrapped Him tight in swaddling cloths,
And laid Him in the manger bed,
To keep Him safe from danger.

He tried to teach us all to live
A righteous, Christian life.
He came to bring us back to God,
A life devoid of strife.
He trained His disciples how to live,
The Kingdom entrusted to them,
Others came through their witness,
And found new life in Him.

He paid a debt He did not owe,
We owed a debt we could not pay.
A cross was His reward,
We need to thank Him every day.
We should live a life of JOY!
A life of LOVE and PEACE!
To glorify this wondrous BOY,
Whose blessings never, ever cease!

As we finish our Advent journey, let us recommit ourselves to being living Christmas letters, seeing people through God's eyes of love, bringing them to Jesus, our Prince of Peace, through our lives filled with joy.

(Alternative)

A Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace:

where there is hatred, let me sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen.