

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

I CORINTHIANS 1: 22-31

GLORY IN JESUS--DURING ADVENT!

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”

Have you been counting—not the number of days until Christmas, but—the number of times you have been asked—“Are you ready for Christmas?” It’s quite a common question, and more of a greeting, than anything else. You can give an answer in a satisfied or a frustrated way with Yes, No, Sort of, Not yet, Getting there. A better question to ask yourself is, What is it I really have to do to get ready for Christmas?

In this first chapter of Corinthians Paul has been comparing what the world thinks, and what God thinks about getting a person ready to stand before God. The world looks for a message with Power. “If you want us to feel confident that God is with us, and not against us, we need to see a demonstration of Power in our behalf. If you claim to be telling us what makes a person right with God, we need to see some proof that what you’re telling us is true. Do a miracle! Do the impossible! Do something that ordinary people can’t do. Maybe, cause a tree to fall down, have a lightning bolt boom down right in front of us, foretell who will be the winner of the war overseas, or the final score of the ball game, etc. Show us signs of divine Power, then we will believe you have the inside track on how to get us ready to stand before God.”

Is not that also a common approach to Advent and Christmas? Many would point you to works of Power to satisfy you that you are ready. “Here, put up the finest Christmas tree ever decorated—that will help make Christmas happy and mean you were prepared. How about a beautiful yard display of lights-upon-lights so that people steadily stream by in their cars impressed by what has been done and what they see. Yes, that will be a good way to get yourself and others ready for Christmas. Pile up presents under the tree, not just a few things, but lots of things, not just nickel and dime things for kids, but expensive, exquisite gifts, for the adults too. Spending a lot of money on others always creates a Christmas “high” with all the wondering about what’s in those packages and the anticipation of opening them. Or, a lot of good food and good treats. A fabulous, I mean fabulous, meal and the promise of a fabulous meal, will always make people ready to gather together and be happy. This is how you can prepare for Christmas. With Power! Have you heard those voices too?

Let’s go back to chapter 1 of I Corinthians. There’s another way for the world to feel confident that the Christmas for which one is preparing is right and true; that it indeed leads one to stand in God’s good graces. What is it? Something different from Power. A lot of people in this world know that materialism and having things is not what makes a strong and happy bond between people. A parent can give a child ever so much, but that doesn’t bring about a strong bond of hearts between them. Usually it’s quite the opposite. It’s the same with standing before God. The world says that what’s needed is some Wisdom. A superior way, maybe a new way for you, to approach the whole concept of approval from God. Perhaps it’s approaching life with the thought that God is in everything on this earth. “For a person to be at one with beasts, with birds, with forests, and plains, and also with people, is to be at one with God. There’s Christmas assurance.” Or, maybe the approach that life keeps getting recycled. A “life” exists for a while as a rabbit, then a field of flowers, then a bear, then a man, and the cycle keeps going. “Do the best you can, whatever phase you’re in, and God will be happy.” That is delightful Wisdom from this world.

A Wisdom that suits our thoughts is also around at Advent and Christmas time. “Be approving and supportive of everyone at Christmas time—whether their values are Scripture’s values or not. After all you could have been one of them. Who’s to say they are in the wrong and need to be corrected. God is in all things. There are many paths that lead to God. Give others some slack. Live at peace with others and with mother nature and the environment. Do not slaughter cattle, or hunt deer. Then you will have a Christmas of peace and contentment.” This “wisdom” is the message of Christmas, says many a mind.

But what does Scripture say, “This is a faithful saying worthy of all acceptance/acceptance—Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners of whom I am chief” (I Timothy 1:15). Advent and Christmas is about Jesus coming into this world. It’s about preparing hearts, definitely your own heart, to greet Him. What is needed? The realization “*I miss and have missed the target* far too many times to be pleasing to God. *I cross the forbidden line* far too many times—sometimes on purpose—to be found approved by Him. I am *unequal* to God’s standards. I am in trouble, I am in a hopeless spot. I need help. Power isn’t going to help me before God. Wisdom/philosophy isn’t going to do it. How do I erase the marks against me?” Jesus, God’s eternal Son, did it for you, stepped in your shoes, as your brother, came into the world to save sinners of whom “I” am chief. Could Paul say that? Can we each say that? How can each of us be the worst? When you stand alone before God, and He has the goods on you, and He’s not talking about anyone else just about you, what’s the only answer you can give? “I have no defense. I cannot deny it. I am the worst.” But then know that for you—and you, and you—Christ came. He has come to snatch you out of the fire alive, to sacrifice Himself to save you, and yet astoundingly He lives again! In Him your record is cleared, your sins *deleted*, God’s loving forgiveness is granted to you, for Jesus sake.

What makes Christmas a joy? What makes you prepared? Realizing that in Jesus you have life, just as this ever-green tree pictures the ever-lasting life that is yours. But there’s something else to look at and to realize—the cross behind me. It’s the tree He took—in love for you. The cross doesn’t stir our emotions any more. It’s a piece of architecture, it’s a piece of art, it’s a piece of jewelry, it has nice symmetric proportions. But really it’s a gruesome method of execution. Think of that! What if you walked into church and immediately you saw an executioner’s ax and block? Startling. I kept our live Christmas tree in the garage for a week before we brought it in. I tied it, so as to stand it up in bucket of water. A week later I put the tree in a stand and took it inside. When I went back to the garage, I cringed. There was the rope hanging from the rafter to which the tree had been suspended. Maybe I watch too much Gunsmoke, but I immediately thought of a hangman’s noose and quickly took it down. Do you see why Christmas, when truly linked to Good Friday and Easter, is not well thought of by the unbelieving world?

For us who have been brought to faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection, the Cross means our LIFE! But the unbelieving world sees it as absolutely foolish and weak. If one is guilty, how does a death-cross make them feel better? If one is dying, how will hearing about a *crucified* (ugh!) Jesus of Nazareth comfort the heart? Of itself, No. But we know the end and why it happened. He took it so we wouldn’t. He rose from death and He will raise us as well. But to the unbelieving world it lacks power and wisdom. It’s weakness and it’s foolishness.

The same is true of Baptism. To the sin-blinded human mind,, it’s just water. At best it can only be a symbolical washing. How can it be a washing of “regeneration and a renewing of the Holy Spirit”? How can it wash away sins? Likewise the Lord’s Supper. To human reason, it is at best just a ritual to show we align with Jesus. But Scripture says, “Whoever eats the bread and drinks of the cup in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord! (I Corinthians 11:27). Scripture invites childlike faith, teaching us that it is bread, wine, body and blood, not cannibalistically eaten, but eaten in a manner beyond reason and logic, which assures the recipients that because of Him, they stand before the Father and receive the verdict Not Guilty—justified!.

Truths of Scripture do not appeal to the worldly wise or to the worldly powerful. It’s true at Advent and Christmas. To those in whom God has worked childlike faith, the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ is the power and wisdom of God!

For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, “He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.”

Are you ready for Christmas? You do not have to do one earthly thing to be ready for Christmas. A heart burdened by sin, hearing the Word, and clinging to life and salvation in Jesus is ready for Christmas! “*He who glories, let him glory in the Lord.*”

So be it! Amen.

Pastor Kanzenbach---