

**First Sunday in Advent
December 1st, 2019
Pastor Matthew Ude**

If God Cleanses Our Hearts We Shall Be Clean

We just finished thanksgiving. In fact many are not here today because they are still celebrating thanksgiving with their families. Vanessa and I didn't host thanksgiving this year we went up to Eau Claire. But in other years we have had family come down here, and as much as we like having people come visit us, it does necessitate a lot of cleaning and then cooking and then more cleaning, and in the meantime Kaylee scoots over to the book shelf and then there is even more cleaning there. Sometimes, however, for example when it is Vanessa's mom who is coming and when we are extra busy we don't bother to clean and then when Susan comes she maybe does a little bit of the cleaning herself or watches Kaylee so that Vanessa and I can get things done.

We just sang *Oh, Come, Oh, Come Emmanuel* praying that Jesus would come and visit our hearts. But the problem is our hearts are not in any condition to receive a visit from God. They need more than a little bit of scrubbing.

Christmas is a time of celebration, we rejoice at the wonderful gift that has come to us. But Advent is a time of preparation. It is a time of cleaning, and in case you missed the large red letters on the church sign this morning, it is a time of repentance.

But the problem is that there is more cleaning that needs to be done than we can possibly accomplish even in four weeks. In fact we can never clean our hearts ourselves and prepare them for God's coming. We need God to do that for us.

C S Lewis in his third Narnia Book, the *Voyage Of The Dawn Treader*, has a very vivid image of this truth. Eustace is changed into a dragon because of greed and selfishness, and then in the book Aslan in the form of a lion appears to Eustace. Eustace is ashamed of what he has become and uses his claws to try and tear off his scales. But although he is bleeding everywhere he hasn't really made any progress until Aslan breathes on him and changes him back into a boy.

This is what we see emphasized in our text this morning. That if God cleans our hearts we will be prepared for His coming. It is not something that we have any chance of doing ourselves.

Luke 1:1-4 Inasmuch as many have taken in hand to set in order a narrative of those things which have been fulfilled among us, ² just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us, ³ it seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, ⁴ that you may know the certainty of those things in which you were instructed.

Notice that Luke's gospel is distinct from the other Gospels. Whereas the other Gospels were eyewitness accounts Luke's is not. Remember that Paul apparently found Luke in Troas, and as far as we know that is when he first became a Christian. If so he was avid in his faith from the very first for he accompanied Paul from there and endured much tribulation with Paul.

However the point is that Matthew and John for sure and probably Mark as well witnessed firsthand most of the things they wrote about. But Luke had to do the research. And this is very valuable to us. It's very useful to have both, to have the eye witness account and the meticulous research gives great assurance to our faith.

This is probably also why Luke is the only one with the birth narrative. Matthew has a very short form of it, just enough to show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies. But Luke rather than simply relating the things he saw digs back into the history of Christ, finds the sources and gives us the details of His birth and lineage.

Zacharias and Elizabeth are called righteous only by God's grace.

Luke 1:5-6 ⁵ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elizabeth. ⁶ And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

Luke here by inspiration of the Holy Spirit correctly and rightly praises two who had served God faithfully their whole life. God does not forget such service nor fail to reward and praise it, nevertheless this is not a righteousness which will avail the two of them on the day of judgment. It is not a righteousness that makes them ready for God's coming. Being good Lutherans we know this, but we can also see this is true from the context.

First the Angel Gabriel rebukes Zacharias with the words "I stand in the presence of God." With these words the angels Gabriel makes it clear to Zacharias that he has an honor which far exceeds what Zacharias has. It is also clear that Zacharias does not stand in the presence of God. This reminds us also of Enoch. Of Enoch it is said that he "walked with the Lord and was not for the Lord took him." It is clear that Zacharias' righteousness does not even match the righteousness of Enoch and even Enoch does not match Gabriel nor was Enoch's righteousness enough for salvation for we are told in the book of Hebrews "by faith Enoch was taken."

Second Zacharias himself proclaimed "he has redeemed his people" and again "a horn of salvation" and again "to give knowledge of salvation in the forgiveness of sins." Therefore Zacharias himself acknowledged that salvation is through forgiveness through faith in Christ and not through the works of the law.

Finally we can take a look at Phil 3:4-11.

Philippians 3:4-9 NKJ ⁴ though I also might have confidence in the flesh. If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the

tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. ⁷ But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. ⁸ Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

Here Paul reminds us that whatever good deeds we may think we have, whatever righteousness we may think is ours it is nothing compared to him and nothing before the Lord. Therefore it is far better that we take our good deeds and offer them as gifts before the Lord rather than try to claim anything from Him or anyone else.

When you have old clothes you need to get rid of you don't try to sell them back to the store. You take them to good will and give them away free. Whatever righteousness we think we have before the Lord are worth less than those old clothes. So we offer them up as free gifts of love to the Lord. We don't try to claim anything from the Lord because what we would get in return is nothing. We also receive by His grace the free gift of righteousness through Christ and the free gift of his resurrection.

This is part of repentance not only that we acknowledge that we are filled with sins but that we also acknowledge that any good thing we think we may have done is really worth nothing.

We see here an excellent comparison to marriage. How terrible and cumbersome a marriage where one or both spouse keep score. I did this therefore you need to do this or you did this bad thing therefore I will do this bad thing to you. We should take note of when our spouse does an act of love but not to balance the scales but rather to thank them for it but concerning the times when they have failed to be loving we ought not to keep track or even take note of it. Well has it been said "love does not keep score" but even more than that the apostle Paul says love "thinks no evil." Not only does it not keep score it does not even notice when anything evil is done against it. Therefore in our marriage as before God we should offer up acts of love as a free gift of love to our spouse and to God seeking nothing in return.

This is what Luke talks about when he says "they were righteous before God." He says before God because the service they offered was a service of the heart to God and not before men. The Lord himself tells us that many of the priests and Pharisees were concerned more with what men thought of them rather than with what God thought. For many their service was a service for the praise of men and not of God. But Zacharias and Elizabeth in humility and repentance sought to serve God with their hearts and not only outwardly for men. By faith then their service was accepted by God and they are called righteous and holy not because their service was without fault but because through faith because of what Christ would do for them God saw no fault or sin in them but saw only that which was good and righteous.

It's like those images, where when you look at them you see only grey, but then you put on special glasses and you can see the image. Through faith

Christ stands between us and God and all that is evil and filthy and rotten is covered and the only thing God sees is what is good. Here then is a truth of scripture God only sees the good in that which is done with repentance and faith. That which is done without faith and without repentance there is nothing righteous in it.

Therefore as we prepare for Advent we start with repentance. This repentance leads to faith. This faith leads us to offer up any good thing as a free gift to God. And through Christ is God's commendation "holy and righteous and blameless."

God is hidden from us because of our sin but revealed by His grace.

Luke 1:7-12 ⁷ But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years. ⁸ So it was, that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And when Zacharias saw *him*, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.

Notice that it doesn't say the Angel came down to the altar, but only that the angel appeared. Was the Angel always there or maybe at least there waiting for Zacharias? This is possible but it is not seen until the Angel by the will of God chooses to reveal himself. This is not insignificant, because it is clear that God is hidden from us by our sins, but then He reveals himself to us by His grace.

Again many people foolishly seek to find a way to God themselves. But the problem is our sin, and that is not a problem we can take care of ourselves. Indeed Zacharias' unworthiness is immediately seen in that he was troubled and filled with great fear.

It is precisely because of this fear that God and His angels are hidden from us. When we appear before God nothing is hidden from His sight.

Consider the thing or things in your life that you are mostly deeply ashamed of, those things which you fervently hope that no one ever finds out about. In the presence of God and his angels these things are clearly seen, the darkest part of ourselves is suddenly revealed.

We are very good at making excuses, at hiding things we don't want seen, at forgetting, and we have many other defenses that allow us to walk about on this earth thinking, "I'm an ok guy." But in the presence of God, all those paltry defenses are stripped away and our hearts are laid bare not only before God but often to ourselves as well. Every time the result is the same, "great fear."

It's a little bit like when I was a teenager and I would watch a movie and then I would go home and say, "Hey dad you have to watch this movie you'll love it." And then while I'm watching it with my Dad all of a sudden

every word is a swear word or inappropriate and I didn't notice these the first time but in my Dad's presence I am very aware of these things.

A house isn't dirty when the lights are off, right? But the light of God's glory shines into our hearts and we realize just how filthy our hearts are and how much they are not ready for a visit from Jesus.

And yet the angel does not come for this reason. He does not come to create fear but to give joy. Over and over the angels first words are "fear not." Because they do not come to judge our sin but to announce the wonderful message that a savior for those sins is born.

Here we also think of private confession. We have slowly drifted away from the habit of private confession. We don't like to do it because we don't like to expose those sins. And we always have a good excuse as to why we don't really need to. "I know my sins are forgiven." We are afraid to come before our pastor and open our hearts in this way. But the purpose of the pastor (and God through the pastor) is the proclamation of the good news. The purpose is so that through the Pastor the Lord can clean out your heart and make the place ready for His coming.

God sends His word to make ready a people prepared for Christ.

Luke 1:13-17 ¹³ But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. ¹⁴ "And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth. ¹⁵ "For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ "And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ "He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

The people of Israel had had 1500 years to prepare for Christ's coming. Most of them went to "church," offered up all the sacrifices, prayed to God. They were all outside praying at this very moment. And yet the angel's words here make it clear that they were a people totally unprepared for the Lord's coming.

When it comes to piety and religious zeal none of us have anything on the Israelites of Christ's time. And yet the Angel's message makes it clear that they are not prepared.

If they couldn't get ready in 1500 years it is rather foolish of us to think we can prepare in four weeks or 38 years or in 60 or 70 years. If they with their zeal and their bible schools and their attention to the details of the law were not ready for Christ's coming how much less so us. It is arrogance and foolishness to think we are any better than them.

Yet the angel came for this very reason to announce a solution. The Spirit of the Lord would proclaim the Word of the Lord. And the Spirit would work through that word with the power of the Lord to make ready a people prepared for God. At that time the Spirit worked through John, now he works through His word. But it is the same Spirit and the same power.

We cannot clean our hearts on our own. It is only the spirit and power of God's word that can make us ready. Yet by His grace He has done so, cleansing us through baptism and the Lords Supper and the preaching of His word. So that we are His own special people washed and cleansed and ready for His coming.

Amen