

**New St. James Presbyterian Church  
First Sunday of Advent  
Sunday, November 28, 2021**

**“Increase and Abound in Love”  
I Thessalonians 3:9-13**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (vv. 12-13).

Advent, as I explore in the upcoming newsletter, orients us in two directions: we look back in *celebration* to the coming of Christ at Bethlehem, and we look forward with *anticipation* to the coming again of Christ. As one scholar puts it, “the season of Advent cannot escape the pull from both past and future” (Jeter). And today, the First Sunday of Advent and the first Sunday of this new liturgical year, the emphasis is always toward the future, toward that day when Christ will become unmistakably “present again” (Wright). In this way, Advent—and especially this Sunday—“is focused on a reality that is yet to come” (Evans).

However, looking toward this unglimped reality carries a particular risk. The anticipation of the return of Christ can at times lead Christians into a kind escapism, where the expectation of Christ’s coming breeds a certain indifference about the world in which we live: it’s the view that, since this world will end anyhow, there’s no real need to care for it today. And so Christians may become, as the saying goes, “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” You might think through this with the analogy of caring for a tree: if you think a tree is marked for destruction; if you think there’s that fateful red ‘X’ spray-painted on its trunk; if you think you can already hear the chainsaw rumbling in the distance; then you likely won’t be very invested in caring for that tree, in watering and pruning and fertilizing that tree. If it’s going to be ended anyhow, this perspective goes, then why bother?

Yet, the doctrine of the coming again of Christ is fundamentally misunderstood whenever it leads to indifference about the world around us. The promise of the coming again of Christ never permits us to turn our backs on this world; rather, this promise motivates us to turn compassionately *toward* the world: indeed, the promised coming of Christ assures us that our acts of compassion in this world are never in vain because God has not abandoned God’s creation.

Think again of that tree, as we extend the analogy. If someone deems it marked for destruction, believing it bears a red ‘X,’ there’s nothing more worth doing; yet this is not our situation at all. Rather, the promised coming of Christ is like tending to a tree while knowing that the one who planted the tree and loves the tree will return in the end to revive that tree to its fullest glory. We can prune, fertilize, water, care for the tree with confidence and hope, knowing that—in the end—it’s not entirely up to us, knowing that the Arborist will return to restore the tree in

ways we could never even imagine. The tree is not marked with the red 'X' of destruction, but rather is marked with the sign of the cross of reconciliation.

And so today, on the First Sunday of Advent, as we look toward “a reality that is yet to come,” we also find encouragement to care for this reality now, for the world around us. Listen again to how St. Paul puts this in our Epistle Lesson: even as Paul anticipates, in his words, “the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” in the future, he calls the Thessalonians to embrace the concrete practices of love now: “And may the Lord *make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all*, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness *that you may be blameless* before our God and Father *at the coming of our Lord Jesus* with all his saints” (vv. 12-13). Paul invites the Thessalonians to “increase and abound in love for one another and for all” (v. 12), “call[ing] them to widen [the] circle and [to] practice mutual love for one another in Christian community and [...] beyond [...] for all people” (Hilton). For Paul, there’s no trace here of any indifference toward the concrete world; instead, the anticipated return of Christ is the very promise that motivates his call to enact love and compassion, inviting the Thessalonians to grow in love so that they may be—in that remarkable phrase—“*blameless* before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus.”

The challenge Paul issues to the Thessalonians—and to us—is to live in ways that conform to the coming of Christ, that align with the promised presence of Christ. There’s a bumper sticker that reads: “Jesus is coming. Look busy!”—and there’s really some truth to that. Jesus is coming, so let us live in ways that befit the presence of Christ; Jesus is coming, so let us follow ways of acting that conform to God’s actions in Christ; Jesus is coming, so let us live in ways that correlate to the nearness of the Lord. And what does that look like? What does it look like to act in ways that correspond to the coming Christ? Well, Christ will return to restore what is broken; so we can, in our small ways, work to restore the broken places and relationships in our lives... Christ will return to redeem the oppressed and the lost and the hopeless; so we can, in our small ways, advocate and enable justice and equity. Christ will return to save this groaning creation; so we can, in our small ways, oppose the outrageous misuse of our natural world.

And what unites all these facets of the coming of Christ—and our response—is, simply put, love. As Ariel will sing: “O’er every foe victorious, Christ on his throne shall rest, from age to age more glorious, all blessing and all-blest: the tide of time shall never his covenant remove; his name shall stand forever—that name to us is Love” (Montgomery). God loves the world, so God has not in the end abandoned the world, but promises to return in Christ, the Lord of love...and so we may be encouraged to enact love in concrete ways, looking toward that day when love will at last be all in all. As the theologian H. Richard Niebuhr put it: “the purpose of the church [is] the increase of love of God and neighbour.” And we can do the work of love cheerfully and confidently and hopefully, knowing that—though we can usually act only in small and seemingly insignificant ways—the one is yet coming who will accomplish what we could never conceive, and make this hurting world whole at last. The tree that seems at times wilted and scarcely alive will once more flourish like the Tree of Life.

Of course, the doctrine of the coming again of Christ should always leave us full of questions and uncertainties: there’s much we cannot understand or know. However, as one writer puts it, “*What we do know* is that [...] we have some experience of the holiness and abounding love

described by Paul, [and] [t]hese experiences give us a sneak preview of the days to come. [...] God is preparing a future of justice, freedom, reconciliation and wholeness. As we wait and prepare for those days, we are to imagine this new age. We are invited to think with anticipation, pray with confidence, and work with commitment for that future” (Morris). And as we consider the mysteries of this doctrine, it’s helpful to remember humbly that though the “how” and the “when” will remain inevitably obscure to us—at least at this end of time—the “who” and “why” of the coming again of Christ remain crystal clear: Christ will come again, out of love for the same world in which—and for which—he died.

And, amid the mysteries and uncertainties of the coming again of Christ, we’re left with practical work to do—work which mirrors and anticipates the loving reign of Christ that’s nearer now than when I began this sermon. Part of the hope of this day is that it’s not all up to us; part of the challenge of this day is that some of the work is indeed ours to fulfill. As we wait and hope for the final redemption of creation, there are people who need encouragement, relationships that need mending, wildlife that needs protection, injustices that must be set right, and hatreds that must be opposed. And we may do all this knowing that the one is coming who will yet restore what we cannot.

“And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints” (vv. 12-13). Amen.