

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24 (Third Sunday in Advent—Series B)**“Waiting for the Completion”****Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield, CT****December 13, 2020**

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our text is the Epistle reading recorded in 1Thessalonians 5:

²³Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely, and may your spirit, soul, and body be preserved complete, free from blame, at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴He who calls you is faithful, who indeed will do it.

There are several partially completed statues once begun by the Renaissance artist, Michelangelo. Like those sculptures, we are all unfinished products, spiritually speaking.

And we will remain unfinished until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's say, then, that we are like blocks of marble that the Divine Sculptor must make into something beautiful. No, we must be more than beautiful. We must be made to resemble the image of Christ. We must be made like Christ. First and foremost, that means we must be holy, without sin. We must have perfect love for our Father in heaven as well as perfect love for our fellow humanity. This love is a self-sacrificing love, a love that counts others more significant than our selves (Phil 2:3). It is a love that places God first—no other gods before Him—as we love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. A perfect love, perfect holiness, perfect righteousness.

Sounds like we need to somehow get back to the Garden of Eden. Sounds like we need to return to that pristine state that Adam and Eve possessed before the Fall into sin in Genesis 3. They were without sin. They had perfect love for God and each other, as well as perfect holiness and perfect righteousness. Created in the image of God, they knew God perfectly as He wished to be known. They had no other gods to receive their worship,

adoration, and love. And then they found their idol, the god of self. They desired to be like God, to usurp His power and authority as the Creator. They ate the forbidden fruit. They sinned, creating a separation between humanity and God. Adam and Eve, along with all their descendants, were no long holy, no longer righteous, no longer able to truly love with their whole selves. Humanity is now selfish. Sin turns us inward toward only ourselves. Forget about God; forget about the needs of others. Me first and me always! No love, no righteousness, no holiness. Only separation from God. Only sin and death.

Not a story that sounds very hopeful for humanity to be fashioned into something holy and righteous. We'd even settle for beautiful simply because that is more than we started with as ugly, selfish, prideful, hate-filled sinners.

Sin is ugly! Listen to the words that come out of your mouth. Look at your actions, consider your thoughts. Do you want anyone to truly know what you have thought and done and desired? It's too ugly to even think about. Sin is also selfish! It's full of pride. It's also filled with hate—hatred toward God which is our rebellion against Him; hatred toward people who were created in the beginning in His image. No holiness, no righteousness, no love. Not at all the image of Christ. No, we bear the image of Adam. We carry around sin in us by nature. We wear the cloak of death.

So did the Thessalonians. And yet, Paul prays that the God of peace Himself would sanctify them completely. But peace doesn't exist between the holy God and sinful humanity. Sinners are in a state of rebellion, a state of war, with God. But God purchased the peace between corrupt humanity and Himself. God gifted to unholy, unrighteous, and unloving people His One-of-a-Kind Son, Jesus, who purchased and won that peace for us

all. We read in Ephesians 2, "Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, . . . having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father" (Eph. 2:12–18 ESV).

Humanity has been brought near to God our Father because Jesus Christ destroyed that dividing wall of hostility with His death on the cross. Jesus shed His blood, atoned for our sins, purchased our forgiveness, thereby making peace between us and God through the forgiveness of our sins. Your sins have been covered over by the blood of Jesus. They stand completely forgiven. All the hateful words, all the ugly actions, all the lustful thoughts are forgiven. You have peace with God. Romans 5:1, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Wasn't that the Gospel promise at Jesus' birth among us, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14 ESV).

Promise fulfilled! Sin is forgiven. "All our debt Thou hast paid; Peace with God once more is made!" (*LSB* 617:2). And it is this gift of grace that enables God to sculpt us into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. We are given Jesus' own holiness and righteousness. As Isaiah promised in our Old Testament reading, "[The Lord] has clothed me with the

garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Is. 61:10 ESV). It was at your Baptism that God the Holy Spirit put on you the robe of Christ righteousness that covers all your sins. It was at your Baptism that the Holy Spirit created saving faith in your hearts so that you trust and believe in Jesus who died and rose again to be your Savior from the ugliness of sin and the punishment of death. It was at your Baptism that God the Holy Spirit, the Divine Sculptor, began His good work in you, starting to shape and fashion you more and more into the image of your Lord Jesus.

St. Paul by the power of the Holy Spirit wrote in Philippians 1:6, "And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ." This is also what the Apostle writes to the Thessalonians in our text today. The God who is now at peace with sinners solely because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ gives His Holy Spirit to us through the Gospel and the Sacraments. God the Spirit works a renewal of our whole lives in body, soul, and spirit, so that when Jesus the Lord of all comes again in His glory, we the redeemed in Christ will be made fully holy, righteous people who will perfectly love God and one another. "God's faithful," Paul says, "He will indeed do this."

Until that day, we are unfinished products, spiritually speaking, as the Holy Spirit does His work in us. As we hear the Lord's Word and receive the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood regularly, the Holy Spirit works on us through these chosen Means of Grace. The Spirit, through Word and Sacrament, continues to chip away at us and shape us so that we more fully resemble the image of Christ. At times, He may have to cut or chisel deeply to achieve His desired results. Lumps of hate, pride, and lust may have to be

hacked away until God-pleasing humility reveals itself. Sometimes, the Spirit might have to use a heavy girt sandpaper on us. This might prove painful, but it will produce a more polished Christian.

The end result will be revealed at the coming of the Lord Christ. Be assured, God will not give up on you in the meantime. He began His work in your Baptism. He will complete it at the day of Christ when sin will be no more. Then, you will be free from blame, completely holy, because God in Christ through the Spirit is faithful to His promise. He is faithful in calling you to be His child. He will be faithful to you unto the end of the age.

Amen.