

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13 (First Sunday in Advent—Series C)**“You are Beautiful in Christ”****Lutheran Church of Our Redeemer, Enfield CT****November 28, 2021**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

⁹For what thanksgiving are we able to repay to God concerning you for all the joy with which we rejoice because of you before our God, ¹⁰night and day super-abundantly praying that we might see your face and complete what is lacking in your faith. ¹¹Now may He, our God and Father and our Lord Jesus, direct our way to you. ¹²May the Lord increase and cause your love to overflow for one another for all, just as also we do for you, ¹³to establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the Coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints.

A man in Scotland spent the day fishing and stopped at an inn in the evening for refreshments and also for an audience with which to share his fish stories. As he described the one that got away with the usual hand gestures to indicate the size of the fish, he flung his hands out without watching where they were going. As he did so, he struck a waitress who was about to set a cup of tea on the table. The cup and its contents were dashed against the wall and immediately an ugly brown stain appeared on the white surface.

The fisherman was embarrassed and apologized profusely. But one of the guests got up from the table and said, “Never mind.” He took a pen from his pocket and began to sketch around the brown spot. Soon there emerged a picture of a magnificent royal stag with huge stately antlers. The artist was the famous English painter of animals, Sir Edward Landset.

In a way, this is what God does with us. In our faults and sinfulness, we are like that ugly brown spot on the white wall. But God, like the painter, takes us for what we are and makes us into something beautiful.

Now, we’re not talking about physical beauty or attractiveness that is very subjective. You know, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” What we are talking about is spiritual. All

people are spiritually flawed and disfigured. We lack the perfection and integrity that God demands. Jesus' straight-to-the-point words in the Sermon on the Mount get right to the matter, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48 ESV). You must be without blemish. Not one single stain of sin or guilt. Completely blameless of any transgression against God and His Commandments. "Blameless in holiness" is what is expected of us because God is holy.

God is holy—without sin and hating sin. He is the thrice holy one of Isaiah 6, "Holy, holy, holy is Yahweh of hosts. The whole earth is full of His glory." And how does Isaiah react to being in God's holy presence? "And I said: 'Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, Yahweh of hosts!'" (Is. 6:5). Isaiah confessed his, and our, situation. We are unclean. We have the stain of sin upon our lips and our hearts. We are not holy as He is holy. We are not blameless before God. We have all fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). We have missed the mark of God's holy demands.

I guess we're pretty used to that concept. We can almost rattle the words off without thinking about them, "We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves." Blah, blah, blah. This is our general confession of sin, and maybe it doesn't always carry the understanding that it should. Maybe my sermons have been a little flat with God's Law, being more general in nature and not very specific. But we need to get specific with our sins. We need to get precise with our spiritual ugliness.

God demands—not suggests—but demands our holiness and perfection. We are to be blameless in holiness. But we hold grudges and harbor resentment. We are sometimes threatening, abusive, or overbearing to others in our homes and workplaces. You and I don't always make time for God's Word and prayer. We speak carelessly, thoughtlessly, and misuse God's name. Do you always speak the truth in love? Are you always content with what belongs to you? Have you ever done anything to break up a friendship or marriage? Have you ever cheated to get what you didn't earn?

Our relationship with God is broken. God must turn His face away from us in horror at us. Our sinfulness makes us unacceptable to Him. Is this how you want to stand before the Holy God when His Son, Jesus Christ, the King, comes again in power and glory to judge both the living and the dead?

In Confirmation class, we've started looking in detail at the Ten Commandments. In a couple months we'll reach the Close of the Commandments, "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love Me and keep My commandments" (Ex. 20: 5–6). *What does this mean?* God threatens to punish all who break these commandments. Therefore, we should fear His wrath and not do anything against them. But He promises grace and every blessing to all who keep these commandments. Therefore, we should also love and trust in Him and gladly do what He commands." And that's the problem. We have broken His Commandments. We do sin against Him, failing to love and trust in Him. And we will continue to fail to do what He commands.

But what did Paul write to the Thessalonians? Listen carefully. "May the Lord . . . establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the Coming of our Lord Jesus with all His saints." I don't make myself blameless in holiness in the presence of God. You don't make yourself blameless in holiness in the presence of God. We're not able to do so. We are lost in our sins and failures to fear, love, and trust in God above all things. But "what is impossible with man is possible with God" (Luke 18:27 ESV). How so? "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10 ESV).

As ugly and repugnant to God's holiness as humanity was and is, God the Son humbled Himself to take upon human flesh and blood, yet without sin, as He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. David's "righteous branch" sprang up among sinful humanity in order to be for us "our righteousness," just as Jeremiah prophesied in the Old Testament lesson today (Jer. 33:14-16).

Our Lord Jesus Christ came in His first Advent so that He might rescue us from the ugliness of our sins and make us beautiful before our God and Father by cleansing us from our sins and sinfulness. Jesus became ugly with our sins before our holy, holy, holy God. He took on Himself all our imperfections, all our blemishes, and all our flaws. Yes, all our grudges and resentment, our threats and abusive language, our careless and thoughtless misuse of God's holy name. He took them all! He bore in His own flesh and blood the original sin with which we were conceived and born. And He made us clean with His holy, precious blood, washing us with the pure water and blood that flowed from His pierced side.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has made you perfect. Hebrews 10:14, "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified." Through the saving

work of Jesus' death on the cross and His triumph over the power of sin and death by His resurrection from the dead, you are made clean. You have been made by Christ "blameless in holiness." He took our imperfections on Himself and gave us His perfection, His fullness, and His integrity.

We visualize this after the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. The newly baptized may wear a white garment, or in some congregations, one is placed on the newly baptized, and we hear these words, "Receive this white garment to show that you have been clothed with the robe of Christ's righteousness that covers all your sin. So shall you stand without fear before the judgment seat of Christ to receive the inheritance prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Yes! You stand without fear at the Coming Again of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints. There is not nothing repugnant to God in you. There is nothing ugly about you. "You were washed, you were sanctified [made holy], you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11 ESV). Your sins are forgiven! You are beautiful to your heavenly Father through His Son Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What an awesome way to begin a new Church Year in the confidence of our Christian faith! We look forward to celebrating Jesus' first coming among us as a baby in a manger who would die on a cross and rise again to make us blameless and holy through the forgiveness of our sins. Jesus has made us beautiful with His own righteousness and holiness bestowed upon us in Baptism. Now we await Christ's Second Coming without fear because we are blameless in holiness—Christ's holiness applied to us in Word and Sacrament. So shall we ever stand before our God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.