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Peace, Sun Prairie
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Advent 1

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13
LORD JESUS, CLEAR THE WAY!

In a Christmas hymn Martin Luther wrote for his children that they could play-act at home while they sang it, entitled *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*, one of the concluding verses prays,

*Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child,
Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled
Within my heart, made clean and new,
A quiet chamber kept for you.*

With the hullabaloo about the holidays, the hustle and bustle, the competing messages, the frustrating delays, the stresses, the regrets, the guilt –all the things that get in the way of Jesus preparing a bed, soft, undefiled within my heart – let’s begin the season of Advent with the reading from 1 Thessalonians 3 setting the tone. Let’s focus on this little prayer from that reading: “Lord Jesus, Clear the Way!”

As we meditate on this section of 1 Thessalonians we can pick up two purposes for which we want Jesus to clear the way. First, Jesus, clear the way to supply what is lacking in our faith, and secondly, Jesus, clear the way to make us ready when you come.

The Apostle Paul who wrote 1 Thessalonians was ecstatic. Thessalonica was a Greek city of the ancient Roman Empire. At that time all roads led through Thessalonica, whether for trade or military. On Paul's second missionary journey, he and his partner Silas visited Thessalonica only for about 4 weeks. Just think, 4 weeks to establish a congregation of Christians from scratch! The pagan and Jewish influences in the city were so pervasive that Paul feared these newbies in the faith would never survive. They'd be swallowed up by unbelief, sinful living, pagan ideas, Jewish religious rules or general persecution from society. While Paul was busy teaching in Athens, he sent Timothy to see what was left of the congregation in Thessalonica. Timothy came back with an encouraging report: they had not only survived, but were thriving! Paul was beside himself with joy. He wrote: *How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?*

Have you ever considered what a miracle it is that we are here today? Have you ever stopped to appreciate what a miracle it is that all these other people sitting around you are here today? Every week for 6 ½ days we are bombarded by so many other things demanding our time, attention, and energy. So many hostile or deceptive or alluring messages, influences, and trends tighten their squeeze on our souls. On the inside we have our old adam that stiffly resists coming. Every week after the service is over and everyone leaves this building a person wouldn't be crazy to stand here and wonder, "Are they going to come back next week? Will anyone come back? Or will they decide that the things taught here are too disagreeable, or unnecessary, or that it's not worth the time & and trouble to lose a perfectly quiet Sunday morning?"

But here everyone is. Granted, some merely out of a sense of duty. Some with a sense of self-congratulation. Some out of habit. But some are here because they hunger to receive Christ with His forgiveness and rescue and new life. Here everyone is. By the power of the Holy Spirit we've survived another week still trusting in Christ as our Savior, still longing for His Word and Sacrament. It's almost more than a person

could have hoped for! God didn't owe us the believers we see around us today. But the Lord Jesus cleared the way and here we are! Just look and marvel! Thank you, Lord.

And now that we are here, how do we want to use the time we have together? The Apostle Paul knew how he wanted to use the time if the Lord Jesus cleared the way for him to reach the Thessalonian believers again. He wrote, *Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.* Literally translated, Paul says he went overboard, completely out of bounds praying that he could see the Thessalonian believers again. Why? What was so urgent? He would supply, that is fix and equip and strengthen, what was still lacking in their faith. Remember, he had only had 4 weeks time to instruct them in the Christian faith. That's not much time to learn everything the Bible tells us. In fact, we never graduate from the school of faith until we are in heaven. When we believers gather together around God's Word and Sacraments, we redeem this precious little time by gaining a more complete understanding of our Redeemer. We redeem this precious little time by gaining a more complete trust in our Redeemer. Life is rough and there's not a more urgent thing we could

pray for. For it's through faith in the Redeemer that we are saved.

We pray for the Lord Jesus to clear the way to us to supply what is lacking in our faith –and He does clear the way. He cleared way to bring us here. He clears the way and comes directly to us through His Word and Baptism and the Lord's Supper to forgive, comfort, strengthen, clarify, warn, focus, guide and direct us. His Spirit clears the way through our crowded thoughts and foggy minds and He enlightens us to grasp and believe His truth.

A firefighter needs to be fully equipped for any circumstance he encounters. In the same way as we worship here Christ equips for whatever we may encounter in life. The most important day for which we want to be equipped is the day Jesus returns visibly on Last Day when this world ends and the new world begins. We don't want to have lost our faith in Him or have been misdirected in our faith by wrong beliefs or in some other way be spiritually waylaid. We pray for the Lord Jesus to clear the way to make us ready when He comes.

One way Christ makes us ready is by giving us the Church, our fellow believers, to help us along the way. The Apostle Paul wrote, *Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.* God wants us to embrace our fellow believers, these people, companions on the bewildering and difficult journey heavenward, as unexpected treasures in our lives –to cling to them and bless them and earnestly desire their good and serve them and be interested in them and desire their company. For in the fellowship of the Church we find tremendous help and support.

Mary Pipher, a nationally renowned psychologist and author, whose most well-known book is Reviving Ophelia also wrote a book entitled, The Shelter of Each Other. Mary Pipher is no Christian. But in this book she makes the argument that perhaps it is not so much psychiatrists and therapists we need as it is our family unit –moms, dads, siblings, grandparents, etc. It is within the family that we gain the greatest sense of wellbeing, wholeness, stability, healing and security. It is not your therapist who will be most likely to

remember your birthday or that you have an allergy to something. Maybe God was on to something!

But God goes even further than giving us families. He gives us the family of believers, the Holy Christian Church. These are people who whom we share all things. We share a common eternal goal through faith in one common Savior. Because of that we ultimately share the same priorities in all things. Ultimately, the same things make us happy and sad –regardless of earthly difference like a preference for a certain sport or a taste for a certain food.

The apostle Paul compares the Church to a body with all its part –fingers, toes, liver, eyes, and teeth. All the individual parts work together to bless and help the common good. In the same way all the believers work as a body to bless the Church itself. One serves to give absolution. Another teaches. Another demonstrates compassion. Another encourages, and so on. God has given us tremendous help and support in the Church to make us ready when Christ comes.

But there's one thing that often spoils it for us: sin. Sin ruins things. Sin causes warts in every family. Even as you sat at the Thanksgiving Day meal there may have

been tensions felt across the table. In the same way, sin causes trouble in our appreciate for the fellowship of the Church. Maybe someone said or did something that hurt. We may avoid them, making as quick an exit out of church as we can –just minding our own business, thank you. Or we even resent some fellow believers because of what they’ve done or said.

The only way the fellowship of believers (or any family, for that matter) can be held together is with the glue of forgiveness and love.

But if love is required for us to be ready when Christ comes we’re in trouble! And we know it.

Love is required. But it’s Christ’s love for you that will rescue your life when He comes. Christ knows the worst of what’s in your heart. Even if we try to sugarcoat it –and we always do. He was fully aware of it when He faced Pontius Pilate. But because He loved you, He took the blame and let Himself be condemned and sacrificed. He has forgiven you and me. His forgiveness –that’s what makes us ready when He comes. Paul continued to write to the Thessalonians: *May Christ strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and*

Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones. As Jesus clears the way to speak His forgiveness to you, you are blameless and holy in the presence of God. You are ready for our Lord Jesus to come.

Now may our Lord Jesus clear the way, as He promised, may He tear open the skies and ride the clouds and may the princes of heaven, the holy angels, march before Him and blast the trumpets, and may He come soon!