

3rd SUNDAY IN ADVENT

December 11, 2016

St. John 5:24 and 7:37-39:

“The Word During Advent: Renews”

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is not uncommon to go to the store or watch a commercial that touts a product as being “new and improved.” However, when you purchase the product, you often discover that it is really nothing more than a slight variation of the old. We have a saying that captures this idea: “Putting Lipstick On a Pig.” To put “lipstick on a pig” is a rhetorical expression used to convey the message that making superficial or cosmetic changes is a futile attempt to disguise the true nature of a product. To some degree, the product may be a little bit better than the old, but when you finally get right down to it, it’s the same old thing.

When God sends his Word to become flesh, Jesus comes into our world and communicates that he wants us to have new life. It is not just a variation of the old. He doesn’t come to put lipstick on a pig. Rather, he comes to make us new from the inside out. The apostle Paul captures this truth when he writes: “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 (Philippians 1:6).” Again, this new life is from the inside out, and it will be brought to perfection.

In John 5:24 Jesus says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” Those are comforting words aren’t they? Christ is “the life of all the living and the death of death our foe,” as it says in a familiar hymn. The Word became flesh to confront and overcome our dead relationship with God. “The wages of sin is death,” Paul writes in Romans 6:23. In our rebellion we have separated ourselves from him and everything good - spiritually and consequently, physically. When Jesus says what he says in John 5:24 about our crossing over from death to life, he is bringing us the assurance that through faith in his person and work, we are not only forgiven sinners, but restored into a living relationship with our heavenly Father. That means that we are his children, and as his children, everything in his perfect house is ours. More than that, he himself is ours, and you can’t get more than that!

We still physically die at the end of our earthly lifetimes, but when we have heard the promise of Jesus and with that believe the Father’s saving purpose in sending his Word, death becomes the doorway to eternal life in God’s presence. When reconnected to God, there is added the promise of physical resurrection from the dead and a forever existence in a new heaven and new earth. What a blessing!

It should never grow old to hear the wonderful truth that the Son of God was born into our fallen world and lived as one of us and acted out God’s love for us to free us from our separation from him, eternal death. As Paul writes (2 Cor. 5:21), “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” What a gift it is that we believe these things! In love he has called us to faith in him so that we might know that everything separating us from him has been removed. We have “passed over from death to life.” This is our new and living relationship with him. He transforms our whole outlook on life, and he works to lead us to our very reason for being his disciples.

With that we are brought to the words of our Gospel lesson for this morning. It is in these words that we are given guidance in our Advent preparation. It says:

On the last day of the feast, the great day, Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" Now this he said about the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive, for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:37-39).

Jesus spoke these dramatic words in a dramatic setting while in Jerusalem with his disciples to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. It is important to understand this feast; otherwise, the words become very hard to interpret.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a yearly commemoration of the forty years of Israel's wanderings in the desert before they entered the promised land - a picture of heaven. It looked back to the time when the Israelites saw God's amazing signs and wonders as He first brought them to the Mountain of Sinai in order to give them his Word. Also, during the time in the wilderness, God miraculously provided for them through the manna - the bread from heaven - and also through water that gushed forth from the rock, who is Christ. To capture the idea that the people of God were strangers on the earth looking forward to their forever home with God, Jewish families built temporary shelters or booths outside their homes and lived in them during the week-long festival. It was a joyous festival because it looked forward to going home and dwelling in the face of God. The people would decorate their tabernacles (tents) with flowers and vines and fruits from the field to remind them of God's constant care for them.

Now, a daily ceremony during the Feast of Tabernacles involved a procession of priests going to the Pool of Siloam with a golden pitcher to bring water into the temple. When they returned, the procession circled the great altar of sacrifice in the temple court, and then the water and a pitcher of wine from the drink offering were poured into two large, perforated, flat bowls. The water flowing out of them symbolized the water that gushed out of the rock to ease the thirst of their ancestors when they were in the wilderness. During the ceremony the people sang Isaiah 12:3: "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" and Psalm 118:25: "Save us, we pray, O LORD! O LORD, we pray, give us success!"

It is in the context of all of this - the Feast of Tabernacles - that Jesus says in our Gospel lesson, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'" The crowd understood what Jesus was claiming when he spoke these words, and hopefully we can also understand with what we know about the feast. He was saying to them that he is the lifesaving water. He was saying that if he quenches their thirst, if he is in them, then out of the heart will flow that same lifesaving water. Again, renewal from the inside out! John tells us that there was division among the people. Some believed that he was the Christ and others did not.

When Jesus' saving work was completed, his promise of living water was wonderfully fulfilled in his apostles. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was given to the apostles to give birth and ultimately complete the New Testament Word. This is what it meant when Jesus said that the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus had not yet been glorified. This giving of the Spirit fulfilled what Jesus had said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own

authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:13-15).” And we believe through their message, by the same Spirit who fills us with the lifesaving water of Jesus Christ.

What an incredible thing to consider! The dramatic promise of the living water of His Holy Spirit comes down to you and me today in the hearing of the Scripture. As Jesus said, “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me (John 15:26).” No longer then do we live in the context of a feast that looks forward, but now we live in such a way as to say that it has been given and is yet to be realized in the fullest sense when we are perfect. Heaven in our home!

If you want your thirst for life’s true meaning to be satisfied, come to Jesus and drink. And he gives himself through the Holy Spirit and the testimony. It is the Holy Spirit’s work to point us to Jesus so that Jesus will become personally meaningful to us as our Savior and Lord. And that is what we celebrate during the Advent/Christmas season. We look back into the manger through the pages of Scripture and see God with Us, and rejoice that Christ came to save. And with that, the living water overflows in us to others. The Holy Spirit equips us to take our place as witnesses to the risen Jesus. Whoever is thirsty, come to Jesus and drink, and find the living water that gives eternal life! And that has nothing to do with lipstick on a pig!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott