

-Shepherd of the Mountains

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The Third Sunday of Advent
December 17, 2017

“This Is the Life!”

Text: I Thessalonians 5:23-24

“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:2).

Ah, now, *that's* nice, isn't it? I mean that's a nice little thought in this time of year of nice little thoughts, right? (Oh,) Not like people today often try to comfort others with “Think happy thoughts!” or “I want you to know in you time of need that I'm thinking good thoughts for you.” That was some of that pitiful “pat you on the head” pious palaver that was trying to pass for “*comfort*” that we looked at *last* week.

And let's not get into the whole “Happy holidays” versus “Merry Christmas” controversy. But this *is* the season for greetings, right? For greeting *cards*. For *Christmas* cards. For Christmas *greetings*. From Hallmark to Helen Steiner Rice to the Dollar Store, Santa's little elves the world over are all working to try to squeeze the season down into

something that can fit on - or fit in - a standard greeting card that can slide into a standard A7 - 5 -1/4 x 7 14 - envelope. And the grand prize goes, of course, to the one who “can name that tune in one note,” who can pare that holiday greeting down to a pithy little one-liner.

Welcome to our world, right?

We *live* in a one-line world. And it's not just the world of *late*, the *Twitter* world, the world of the *sound byte*. The world has always appreciated the good one-liner.

“There's no traffic when you go the extra mile.”

“Winners focus on winning; losers focus on winners.”

Our movies are *full* of one-liners. And some of them, frankly are so good we could say they're downright *inspired!*

“There's no place like home.” (Well, that's Dorothy, of course, from *The Wizard of Oz*.)

“Look eye. Always look eye.” (That's Mr. Miagi from *The Karate Kid*.)

“We're gonna need a bigger boat.” (*Jaws*, right?)

“Begin each day like it was on purpose.” (That's Alex Hitchins from *Hitch*.)

“Either get busy living, or get busy dying “ (That's likeable Red, from *The Shawshank Redemption*.)

“Every man dies; not every man really lives.” (That's the formidable William Wallace from *Braveheart*.)

“*I am not the Christ.*”

What's that?

“*I am not.*”

Say *what?*

“*No.*”

Uh, and that's, of course, John the Baptist - from, well, let's just say, the *Greatest Story Ever Told*.”

Only there's hardly anything worth remembering *there, right?* No inspired one-liner to go down in history, I mean. For When the “*priests and Levites from Jerusalem . . . ask him, 'Who are you?'*” all he can say is who He is *not*.

When they ask him if he might be Elijah, all he can say is that he is not. And when they ask him if he is “*the Prophet*” whom all the Jews understood (Dt. 18:15, 18) to be coming in advance of the promised Messiah, the only word he can get out is *no*.

But then, that’s John, isn’t it? He-must-increase-but-I-must-decrease (Jn. 3:30) *John!*

John, we should say *in John’s gospel*.

Oh, different *Johns*, of course - John *the Baptist*, and *St. John*. But isn’t it rather interesting, to say the least, that in the Gospel where the author himself can’t even refer to himself by his own *name* - where all he say about himself is “*the disciple whom Jesus loved*” (Jn. 13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20) - that this is all we get of John the Baptist? No preaching, to speak of? No long sermons? Just these short one-liners. Truth be told, in half the cases, only *half*-liners!

But then what do you want, I suppose, from . . . from . . . a *voice!*

Here in our world, as I said before, we like the lines. But we also like the voice that delivers them, too, don’t we?

Do you like the genie from *Aladdin*? That’s Robin Williams’ voice, right?

Shenzi from *The Lion King*? That’s the voice of Whoopi Goldberg.

Woody, from *Toy Story*? Tom Hank’s voice.

Horton, from *Horton Hears a Who!*? Jim Carrey’s voice.

Fiona, from *Shrek*? The voice of Cameron Diaz.

Stuart Little, from *Stuart Little*? That voice . . . is Michael J. Fox’s voice, isn’t it?

Clifford, from *Clifford the Big Red Dog*? John Ritter is the voice.

Sully, from *Monsters, Inc.*? John Goodman is the voice.

Carl, from *Up*? Ed Asner is the voice.

Jesus, from *Bethlehem*, from *Nazareth* - soon to be from *Galilee*, from *Judea*? John the Baptist is the voice - “*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’*”

And even though *that* inspired one-liner wasn’t original with John - it was from the earlier prophet, Isaiah - still, though, “*the voice*” is saying a couple of important things here.

One, of course, and he nearly tripped over his camel-hair coat and spilled his bowl of wild locusts in answering it - “*He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed*” is how emphatically John says it - “*I am not the Christ.*” “So, no, don’t look at *me!*” “*I am not your way, truth, and life!*” “*I am not your righteousness. I am not your salvation!*”

Well, now, if the one Matthew describes by saying that “*Truly, . . . among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist*” (Mt. 11:11) feels the need to clarify that for the crowds in *his* day, maybe - just *maybe* - we need to do the same in *ours*. While we’re busy testifying to all the things “*the Christ*” *isn’t*, that is, maybe we need to be clear that that list includes us, too. *We* are not the Christ. *We* are not the Savior. *We* are not the Way. The lost aren’t going to be saved by hanging out with *us*. And they aren’t going to be save by *becoming* like us, *either!*

And the other thing John is saying - what that first admission - that He is *not* the Christ - paves the way for - is to be on the lookout for the one who *is* the Christ. And perhaps you’ve already figured out by now that he’s going to push the people in just that direction in the very next verse after our this Gospel lesson of ours this morning, that that man-of-few-words-in-St.-John’s-Gospel-John-the-Baptist is going to offer one of perhaps his best-known one-liners:

“*Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!*”

In other words, “This is the guy I’ve been *telling* you

about!”

Oh, this is the life, brothers and sisters in Christ; but it's *His* life, not *ours*! *He* is the Messiah. *He* is the Christ. *He* is the Savior. *He* is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

And all because *He is* the perfect Lamb of God, who was sacrificed on the tree of the cross to satisfy the holy justice of God, that *His* death might become *our* death, that is - a death to sin, to death itself, and to the deliverer of death, the devil. By his death, He has destroyed death. And by his rising again to life, he has restored life and immortality to all who believe in Him.

And so, full circle, this is the life, dear brothers and sisters in Christ our Lord. This then is *our* life. A life of thanksgiving. A life, frankly, of thanks-*living*. The very life St. Paul is describing as he closes out his letter to the Thessalonians.

Oh, at first glance, you might think our Epistle lesson is just a random series of inspired one-liners. But when you look at it in context, you see that these exhortations of St. Paul are nothing more than “the life” - the life all Christians are to live - in faith and hope - as they wait for the coming again of their Christ.

Now as you may remember, nobody had more trouble with that waiting for the coming again of the Lord as that young Christian congregation at Thessalonica. They expected Jesus to return immediately. And so many of them just dropped everything, just dropped out of life, just pulled out their lawn chairs, and waited.

To *them*, these words first were written. And also *these* words that come just *before*:

12 We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, 13 and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 14 And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help

the weak, be patient with them all. 15 See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

“Respect your elders” - literally - your *spiritual* “elders,” those “*laboring among you*,” those “*over you in the Lord*.”

“And as for those who quit working and are just sitting around waiting for the world to end - waiting for Jesus to return, *admonish the idle*.” The Greek word is the “disorderly,” “those out of line.”

“*Encourage the fainthearted*” - literally, the “small-souled.” This could be either those who feared for the fate of their loved ones who died in the days since Jesus return to His Father in heaven *or* those who had little courage to face the afflictions that outsiders were bringing upon them.

“*Help the weak*.” Support those who need to be supported - whether their weakness is spiritual or moral.

Yes, this is the life, Thessalonians. And Greer-ites. And Show Low-ians. And Pinetop-pers. And White River-ites.

And this is the life, *too*, as St. Paul goes on:

“*Rejoice always*.” The Greek actually has it the other way around: “*Always rejoice*.” Oh, not in a literalistic or legalistic way. Not as if Christians never have times of grieving, that is. But that rejoicing is a regular expression of the new life that we've been given in Christ. But that even in grief, we do not grieve as those who have no hope; for our hope is in Him who won the victory for us, Him who one day soon is coming again.

“*Pray without ceasing*.” Again, the Greek brings the “always” forward for emphasis: “*Ceaselessly pray*.” And likewise, not in any literal way; but since the life of the Christian is a life of dependence on God, and prayer is the way we “dear children” communicate with our “dear Father”

as we confess in the Catechism, on a continuing basis.

“Give thanks in all circumstances.” Be thankful in everything, knowing that God is always at work on your behalf, even through the difficult times of life.

“Do not quench the Spirit.” None of that “Soak it. Stir it. Soak it again.” where *this* “fire” is concerned! No, St. Paul warns us not to “quench” the “Spirit,” not to pour cold water on His urgings and His work with our resistance, our complaining, and our objections.

To that end, “Do not despise prophecies.”

Now, that’s nothing more than the Third Commandment, is it? “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.” “Do not despise preaching and God’s Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it” (SC).

For that Word is the only way we are able to “test everything.” To keep the good and to toss the bad. That Word of God alone is the standard by which we are to examine everything in our lives, and “try” it, and “test” it, even as ancient coins were tried and tested to see whether they were genuine and of full weight.

And once you’ve done that, Paul urged, “hold fast to what is good” and “abstain from every form of evil.” Hold fast the former, and hold away from you the latter.

/ Wow! That’s quite a list. That’s quite the life - the life we are called to live. But Paul has saved the good news for last. This is the life, all right - the life we’re called to. And it includes doing all those things. But here’s the thing. It’s not up to us. We’re not the ones who will do it. He’s the one who will sanctify us, who will make us holy As Paul continues:

23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

Whew! That’s Good News! “He who calls you is

faithful; he will surely do it.”

He will enable you to be His voice, that is. To be His witnesses. To be his confessors - those who in the “There he is! The one I’ve been telling you about! “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

How’s that for an inspired one-liner!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.