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Midweek Advent II
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Grace-Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita
Christ's Advent in Grace

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

What does it mean to be a *Christian*?
We hear that America is a *Christian Nation*.
We hear that some people hold *Christian* values.
We speak in terms of being a good or bad *Christian*.

But what is it?

Whenever we step back and think in these terms, we end up asking about “the basics.”
What's *essential* to being a Christian?

I think most would answer, first and foremost: “faith in Christ.”
Some would stop there;
others would add things like:
 going to church,
 living a Christ-like life,
 caring for the poor and needy and so forth.

While the majority of Christians probably think along these lines, it's sadly wrong-headed.

Why?

Because in this definition of Christian we begin with us.
We began with man:
 man as someone who would do the believing,
 man as someone who would go to church,
 and live a Christ-like life, whether good or bad,
 and decide to follow and do.

The whole definition is based on us.
And whenever that's the case, we're sure to go wrong—
 in fact, we'd be left with no certainty at all as to whether I'm really a Christian, or not!

Think about it.
If the definition of Christian is based on *your* believing—
 what about those times where you don't feel you believe all that much or well?
 What about those serious doubts that keep popping up in your head from time to time.

And what about your life?
 Can you really say that it's been a *good, Christian life*?
 Can you be sure you're a Christian by how you live?

One thing's for sure:
 if being a Christian is determined by how you live, this is certainly *not* a Christian nation!

But what defines a Christian doesn't start with man—
 either his believing or his doing—
 it starts with Christ.

It starts with His faithfulness and His obedience.
 And so it starts with God becoming man—so a Christian needs Christmas.

The last two weeks, in preparation for Christmas,
 we've spoken of Christ's various *comings*, His multiple *Advents*.
 First we heard of His Advent in the Flesh—in *history*—
 the incarnation, Christmas, and all the ways God has wanted to be found and located.
 Then we heard of His Advent in Glory—
 that future *Second Coming*, with His flesh in a weighty-way,
 a way that'll leave no doubt about who He is or why He comes: as Judge and King!

One was past, one future.
 Today we hear of His coming in Grace—*today*, present, now.

So what does this have to do with being a Christian?

Well, because it's His coming in Grace that is seen today by many Christians as the most
inessential part of being a Christian.

It's strange, but many Christians treat His work *today* as unnecessary, not essential.

Think about it—
 when trying to define what it means to be a Christian, whenever we begin with us,
 we begin with what we do and say and think and feel.

And so the judge of being a Christian becomes some spectrum of how much you believe or how
 close you feel or how good you act.

But if you begin with Christ, then you'd have to begin with what He does and says.
 And if you begin with Jesus, then you no longer find certainty in your degrees of belief or act,
 but in things like Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and Holy Absolution:
 all those, *inessentials*

In the normal conversation of "the basics,"
 the Sacraments are almost always left out!
 They're treated like add-ons, or nice extras.

But in fact, these are the most essential characteristics of being a Christian;
 these are Christ's works: His doing, His saying, His giving *for you*.

And Scripture says that it is these that create the faith that receives the gifts of God.

This is simply the way our confessions talk.

The most central confession of the Christian faith is justification:

“Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight.” (AC IV)

But our Confessions don’t stop there, the very next article begins:

“So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given.” (AC V)

In fewer words, St. Paul says:

“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the Word of Christ.” (Rom 10:17)

To hear you need a voice;

so our Lord has called and ordained men to be nothing more than His mouthpiece *for you*.

Therefore, the pastor is also an essential characteristic of the Christian life.

A Christian is one who has a pastor, a mouthpiece, someone standing *in the stead of Christ*.

This isn’t new, that’s how it was for Moses and Israel also.

In our OT reading we hear:

**“I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt
and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters.
I know their sufferings,
and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians
and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land,
a land flowing with milk and honey...”** (Exod 3:7-8)

Immediately following our Lord’s promise of deliverance, He says to Moses:

“Come, I will send you...” (Exod 3:10)

Moses is Israel’s pastor, Israel’s mouthpiece and deliverer of salvation.

No Moses, no deliverance, no promised land, no milk and no honey.

It wasn’t anything special about Moses, it was God who picked him up for His use.

And then there’s the Sacraments.

Again, the bread and wine and water and word are the vessels through which God comes to man.

They are the instruments of grace.

They are the third Advent of Christ—His coming *now*, His coming *to us*, His coming *for us*.

So says St. Paul,

**“As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup,
you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.”** (1 Cor 11:26)

What does it mean to proclaim the Lord's death,
except that it's His death *for me!*

Baptism, the Lord's Supper, the word of Absolution:
these are the ways that Christ comes to us *now*.

These are central to the Christian faith because they *create* the Christian faith.
They nurture and preserve it.
They water and plant it.
They feed and sustain and save it.

Why?

Because these are what Christ does for us.
They're *His* works, not ours.

And because of that, they're as sure and certain as the Resurrection itself!

So you are Christians.
Not because you've believed hard or well enough.
Not because you've done anything—good or bad,
Not because you've turned your life around or resolved to be better—
you're a Christian because God has come to you in Christ.

He came in the flesh in a manger in time.
He had that flesh crucified in time once and for all.
He raised that flesh from the dead.
And He promised to come again with His flesh in glory.

And in the meantime, He has promised to be with you, always.
Here, from this pulpit, this altar, and that font, our Lord is truly with you in *grace*.
Here He delivers the forgiveness won on the cross *to you*.

Here, you are made Christian and kept Christian—
not by you, but by *Jesus for you*.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit