

14 December 2008
Advent 3

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Being Holied”

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 (John 1:6-8, 19-28; Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11)

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

We heard from St. Paul today these words: ***Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.*** To sanctify means to make holy. And may the God of peace do it, says St. Paul, because we cannot. We poor sinners cannot be or make ourselves holy. Period.

Oh, perhaps you can do good deeds. All of you have, in fact. You've helped and cared for and gone out of your way for others. You are generous with those who need help, both friends and strangers alike. *But you are not thereby holy.* The good you *do* cannot make up for the sin you *have*. If so, a criminal in court could plead all the good things he has done as a defense for the crime he has committed. But he cannot, for he is guilty, and so are you.

The same holds true for our words. Actually, these are even *harder* to control. What most of us are afraid to do we are more than happy to speak - slicing and dicing each other with words that cut far deeper than any knife could. And how often are lips that one moment speak kind and forgiving words the next moment involved in gossip and character assassination?

And then there are our thoughts and desires. If you want some indication of how deep-rooted our sin is, consider how your mind runs amok with all kinds of weird and evil thoughts that you have no control over - *when you dream*. Perhaps if we all talked in our sleep what we dream, we'd realize how sin-filled we all are, and how great a miracle it is that we're here at all; that we haven't sinned ourselves into extinction.

That we haven't, that we're here, is a miracle; the work of our loving God. Even for those who do not believe and want nothing to do with Him. Even for them He is working, loving, and caring, that they may turn to Him and be His children. For while the phrase “we're all children of God” is a popular one, *it is not a true one.* **Only those are children, or sons, of God who are joined to THE Son of God.** Only He can bring us to the Father. Only He can sanctify us. Only He can give us the peace and forgiveness we need in this life.

And so that we may be sanctified and children of God, the Father not only sent His Son to be our sanctification and peace, He also sent John the Baptist. John, who basically had two jobs: (1) to show us our sin, and (2) point us to our Saviour. Who he was wasn't important. That's why (as we heard) when some priests and Levites came to him to find out who he was, he wouldn't tell them - he only told them who he *wasn't*. That he wasn't the One. All he was was a **voice** and a **finger**. The voice of repentance, and the finger pointing to the One, to Jesus. Pointing to and confessing Jesus in all he did and all he said.

Now there are lots of voices and fingers in our world today. Most of the voices aren't worth listening to, and most of the fingers aren't pointing to Jesus, but communicating quite a different message to us! And so lots of people will celebrate Christmas and the baby Jesus, and yet have no idea why. And so John has come to climb into the witness stand and tell us. *To speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God*, for he was sent from God to do so. To cut through the clutter of our lives, that we may know the truth about ourselves, and the truth about our Saviour . . . and how these two truths converge in the manger. That Jesus is the Son of God become a son of man. ***The God of peace*** [come] ***to sanctify you.***

That's why that *Silent Night* was a *Holy Night* - because the Holy One had come to make us holy. Born of a virgin and so born without sin, the Holy One is thus born holy. But why? To become unholy - not through His own sin, but by taking upon Himself ours. By making our sin His, burdening Himself with a burden no ordinary man could bear, and receiving the judgment in our place. And so the innocent one is given, or imputed with, our sin, declared guilty, and sentenced to death on a cross. Giving His life for the life of the world.

The name given this holy One by His parents when He was born was Jesus; the title placed over His head by Pontius Pilate when He was condemned was "King of the Jews"; but the blood poured out upon the ground that day was the blood not just of a man or a king, **but the blood of God**. The blood of God shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. ***To sanctify you completely - your whole spirit and soul and body.*** Not to do the job only part of the way, for part of you; but all of the way, for all of you. No part of you unaffected or untouched. To forgive your sins of thought, word, deed, and desire, that we be holy as He is holy.

The problem is, we don't feel holy. We still sin. We still struggle with temptation. And we still fall. We see and feel these things and so think the work of God is *not* complete - there must be something wrong with me. And so it is important to know that the holiness we are given is not of nature - *not yet*. That will come with ***the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ***, at the resurrection, when our flesh is finally raised

new and we are rid of the sinfulness that has adhered itself to us through and through. The sin that drags us down. The sin that seems to keep sprouting like weeds in our hearts and lives. But though we are not yet holy by nature, **we are holy** - for just as our sin was given, or imputed, to Jesus and He was declared guilty, so His holiness is given, or imputed, to us and we are declared not guilty. Our sin is no longer held against us, for it was held against Jesus in our place. You have been forgiven and set free. Set free from the tyranny and dominion and condemnation of sin, to live as children of God - ***“Rejoicing always, praying without ceasing, [and] giving thanks in all circumstances.”***

And so holiness is a matter of faith. Not in the sense that I'm holy because I believe I'm holy. That would be like me being a dog because I believe I'm a dog! No, we are holy not because we believe in ourselves, but because we believe the Word and promise of our Saviour Jesus Christ, and by faith receive what He has promised: His forgiveness. For as St. Paul told us, ***“He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*** And so even if I don't feel holy, I believe not what I think or feel, but what my Saviour has told me. That I am forgiven and therefore holy; that I have been given His Spirit; and that by His Word and Spirit, Jesus is now causing *holiness* to sprout and grow in our hearts and lives.

And so although you may look and feel the same when you leave church as when you came, you *never* leave this church the same. How could you? *How could you* be the same after your Saviour has told you “I forgive you all your sins”? *How could you*, after the body and blood of Jesus, the body and blood of God, has been placed into your mouths and poured over your lips? *How could you* after the living and active Word has flooded your ears and hearts? **You are not the same.** You have been “holied” - sanctified - by the Holy One Himself. The Holy One who laid in a manger, who hung on a cross, and now comes by His Spirit to live in you.

To do this work is why the Son of God came and was born as the baby Jesus on that Silent Night, as we will soon remember. But when He comes again in glory, that day will be anything but silent, but filled with the rejoicing of the angels, archangels, and all the company of Heaven. Rejoicing as the Bridegroom comes for His Bride, to take her home. Until He does, your Saviour will keep you safe. Safe in His holiness and forgiveness. He is faithful. He will do it.

Advent is now half over. The Nativity of our Lord is not far away now. We lit the rose candle on the Advent Wreath today, for it is the candle of joy. And soon, soon our joy will be complete. Come, Lord Jesus.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds

through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.