

C – Advent 3  
On the occasion of three children who will receive  
1<sup>st</sup> Communion before Confirmation

Today, we come to the three / quarter mark in our preparation for Christmas. The purpose for the Church's four week season of Advent is to, in the words of one famous preacher, "**Prepare the way of the Lord.**"

Now certainly, the Lord comes to His people, not just at Christmas, but all year long. Where ever and when ever we come into contact with the Word of God, in our home, in bible study, here in worship, the Lord Himself comes to us through the wind that carries the sound of His voice into our ears, or the light that carries sight of His Word into our eyes.

But during the season of Advent we are preparing for the Lord to come to us not just by the sound of His voice or His Word written down, but in the flesh. Christmas is all about the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

So, the goal of the season of Advent is to prepare us to meet our Lord who comes to us in His flesh which if you have caught my drift, is starting to sound a lot like the way that we meet the Lord every time He comes to us in the Lord's Supper, where our Lord comes to us through the bread and wine that carries His body and blood into our mouth.

The very fact that there is a 'season of Advent' on the Church's calendar tells us that the Church considers to be important that we would be PREPARED for the Lord's coming to us in the flesh.

There is no particular preparation necessary to meet the Lord when He comes to us in His Word. We welcome anyone and everyone to come and hear the Word of the Lord – no preparation required. But before you may meet the Lord in His body and blood, a certain preparation is necessary.

When St. Paul writes to the Corinthians about the proper way to administer the Lord's Supper, he writes, "**Let a person examine himself and so, let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.**" (1 Corinthians 11:28)

If the Lord's Supper were only a symbol or reminder of His 'spiritual' presence among us, then it would not be so necessary to "**examine ourselves**" before receiving the bread and wine. But since the Lord's Supper is what the Lord says it is, His coming to us in His very body and blood, we are to be properly prepared to "**examine ourselves**" before we meet Him in His flesh and blood.

One of the questions that the church has wrestled with over the ages is 'how much' preparation is necessary? How much 'knowledge' about the Christian faith must someone have before he or she is properly prepared and able to "**examine himself and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup**"?

If you were raised in the Lutheran Church as I was, that answer to that question has been, 'you have to be confirmed.' And to be 'confirmed,' you have to go through that BELOVED two-year process that begins at the age of 12 or 13 called "Confirmation Class." A thorough review of Christian doctrine as outlined in Martin Luther's Small Catechism, complete with lots of bible study and memorization and tests and a speech to the congregation, which is as much a demonstration of nerves as it is knowledge.

But this has not always been the Lutheran practice. In fact, the first Lutherans prepared their children to receive the Lord's Supper just as the church had done for a long time before Luther. Children as young as 6 and certainly by 12 years old would meet with the pastor and after some instruction about how the Lord comes to us

in His very body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins, the pastor would examine the child with a simply question, ‘are you a sinner?’ The child would answer, ‘yes, I am a sinner before God.’ Then he would ask, ‘do you believe that the Lord gives you His body and blood in this sacrament for the forgiveness of your sins?’ The child would reply, “yes, I believe.” And the child would be admitted to the Lord’s Supper and receive the Lord’s body and blood.

So, how did we get from there to where we are today, where we require a child to consume a fairly vast body of information that requires a certain level of maturity, before they may receive the Lord’s Supper?

Flying over the historical details involved, Lutherans introduced the ‘Confirmation Class’ program in reaction to the accusations of a group called the Anabaptists. The Anabaptists are the predecessors of the Baptists who require that before a person can be baptized or receive the Lord’s Supper, he or she must be able to make a mature, personal confession of their faith. And they criticized the Lutherans for baptizing infants, who obviously cannot make such a confession.

Rather than answering the challenge as they should have, by appealing to the gospels where Jesus announced that the ‘little children’ should be brought to Him and that ‘little children’ are actually the example of ‘faith’ that we must all strive for...

And rather than turning to the Apostolic word that says that ‘faith’ is not the achievement of man but the ‘gift of the Holy Spirit’ that is given through the ‘hearing of the Word’...

Our Lutheran forefathers answered the challenge by turning the ‘rite of Confirmation’ into a requirement for receiving the Lord’s Supper, which has created all kinds of misunderstanding among us, chiefly, that ‘confirmation’ is the ‘completion’ of what was begun in us in our baptism.

Whereas Holy Baptism requires no work and is given by grace alone, the Lord’s Supper is too often regarded as a reward for the work we have accomplished.

Later, a movement that is called “Pietism” stressed that a person can never be sure that they actually possess a true faith unless they are able to identify a particular moment when they had the personal experience of being saved.

Once again, Lutherans swallowed the bait and instead of relying solely on Holy Baptism as that moment and experience that we should point to for the assurance of faith, they established the ‘rite of confirmation’ as the Lutheran solution of a ‘personal experience.’ The actual reception of the Lord’s Supper was almost secondary.

This morning, three children of the congregation will receive the Lord’s Supper for the first time BEFORE CONFIRMATION. They began a time of ‘preparation’ in May, working with their parents through a series of eight lessons on the Lord’s Supper.

- They have become acquainted with the LAW OF GOD which shows us that we are sinners who do not live according to God’s will for our life.
- They have become familiar with the GOSPEL OF GOD which tells us that we have a gracious God who has redeemed us from sin and death, not by showing us what we must do, but by forgiving us all of our sin because of what Jesus has done for us.

- They have learned that the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens the faith that He gave us in our baptism, by His ‘MEANS OF GRACE’ which are His Word and Sacraments.
- They have learned that the biblical and correct understanding of the Lord’s Supper is that Jesus Christ is truly present with His very body and blood in the bread and the wine for the forgiveness of our sins.
- They have learned that there are other gifts that are also given in the Lord’s Supper along with the ‘forgiveness of sins,’ such as Christ’s victory over sin and the power of the devil, the strength to resist temptation and live by faith in Jesus Christ, and the communion fellowship that we have with one another, here, through out the world, and even with the ‘company of heaven.’
- They have learned how to properly prepare and examine themselves before every reception of the Lord’s Supper, acknowledging that they are sinful and unclean, and that they cannot save themselves, and that Jesus Christ comes to them in this sacred meal to give us His life and salvation, and therefore we should come to the Lord’s Supper – as often as possible, with reverence as one would come before God Himself, and that we leave the Supper with a peace and joy that only Jesus Christ can give.
- And lastly, they learned how the Lord’s Supper fits into the Divine Service as the ‘feast of victory for our God.’

In my examination with the children on Wednesday evening, I asked them, ‘why do you want to receive the Lord’s Supper?’ They said, ‘because I want my sins forgiven.’ They’re ready.

They’ll continue to grow in knowledge as they continue attend Sunday School, and later come to my BELOVED Confirmation Class when they’re older. But NOW, they are able to ‘examine themselves and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.’

As a pastor, as their pastor, I have been given a few tools with which I am to care for the sheep that the Lord has been entrusted to my care.

- I am given God’s Word to preach and teach.
- I am given the ‘office of the keys,’ so that when you confess your sins, I, as a called and ordained servant of the Word and by Christ’s authority may say, ‘I forgive you all of your sins.’ And may know that the forgiveness that I speak is not mine by the Lord’s.
- I have also been entrusted with the stewardship of mysteries of God, namely Holy Baptism and Holy Communion.

These are the tools, and the only tools, that I have been given to care for this flock. And this is enough, if only because they come from Christ Jesus. Everything else that I may do in addition to this is really more than Jesus established the office of the ministry to do.

To be able to serve these three young people the Lord’s Supper makes me a better pastor for them.

And so this morning, on this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent when the whole Church is busy preparing for the Lord to come in the flesh, we are pleased to bring these children to the Lord’s Table to meet the Lord in His body and blood and receive His gracious gift of forgiveness, life and salvation.