



MORRISON ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

www.mzluth.org

December 1, 2024

Pastor James Enderle

1st Sunday in Advent

First Lesson: [Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)

Psalms of the Day: Psalm 24b Psalter

Second Lesson/ Sermon Text: [1 Thessalonians 3:9-13](#)

Gospel Lesson: [Luke 19:28-40](#)

A Real Christmas... Requires Remembering Why Christ Came **LONGING TO BE TOGETHER IN THE LORD**

1. Being _____ matters
2. The devil _____ separation
3. Jesus _____ us into the _____ of God
4. _____ together is _____

Welcome to worship today at Morrison Zion Lutheran Church. We exist to glorify God. We have set out to do this by gathering around the Gospel so that we may grow in the Gospel and go to others with this Gospel.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Jesus Christ, our Lord:

If you've been watching any football or any TV, you've seen all the commercials. They finally changed from all the political commercials to all the holiday commercials. One commercial I saw was somewhat nostalgic. There was a song playing, Holiday Road, and it is a Coca Cola commercial. I don't know if you saw this one. There are several different people and they are trying to get home. The song is actually very popular from the 80's and 90's. It is used in a lot of comedies. The story reminded me a lot of a movie called Planes, Trains and Automobiles. I don't know if you've seen that before. When we grew up, most of the movies we saw were on TV, and they edit a lot of the things out so the ratings on this one is not super kid friendly, but when we saw it, it was always kid friendly on TV. But the story, if you remember Planes, Trains and Automobiles, and kind of what the commercial talks about, it has John Candy—not John Candy as Gus Polinski—if you guys are Home Alone fans, that's where he was the "Polka King of the Midwest," with the Kenosha Pickers. He talks about how he is really famous in Sheboygan. But here John Candy is playing a different character, Del, and Steve Martin is Neal, and they are in New York and they are trying to get to Chicago. But there is a snow storm, things are delayed, and instead of going to Chicago, they get to Kansas and they run through all sorts of different things. As the movie is called Planes,

Trains and Automobiles, they have to take all these different means to get back to Chicago, including a lot of chaos like cars burning and all sorts of craziness.

Why that is such an interesting story is because it's the holidays, what we are in right now, between Thanksgiving and Christmas. And what do people love about the holidays?—being together. I see some people here together that normally aren't together. It's often all about Thanksgiving and being together or Christmas. We know Christmas is more, and we'll talk about that. But a lot of it is about being together—a longing to be together and what people do to be together and why they want to be together and why the holidays kind of allow that to happen.

What is kind of fascinating is the text that we see today is that Paul is really writing about that. There is a **longing to be together in the Lord**. There is something that has been keeping them apart but Paul wishes they were together. But he gets to write and share and encourage them in the meantime. But as we look at a longing to be together, I think there is a lot that we can learn about that for our lives now and during Advent and what it means to be Christians, about longing to be together, but also a longing to be together in the Lord, especially when He returns. That's really what this first week of Advent is about—a longing to be with Jesus, who is going to come back.

But notice what he talks about to begin with. He says, ***⁹How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you? ¹⁰Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you again and supply what is lacking in your faith.*** Notice he says they are praying. "We pray night and day that we may see you again." Why would he say that? Does it matter if you're together in person? I'd argue that *being together matters*. Would you say that's true? Did we learn that in the last 4-5 years, that being together matters? When you can't be together, when there is this separation, when people can't be together when you want to be together, there is something missing. We saw that with families. I think we saw that with the church. But does being together matter? It's not the same as a phone call or a video call. Video calls are awesome. When I lived in China, it was amazing how our kids could see their grandparents and you could talk and see each other, but it's not the same.

We were at a conference in Green Bay about worship and the presenter was talking about how online worship, this highbred church can be really good and can fulfill all the purposes. He wasn't a WELS presenter and didn't talk about missing the Sacraments part, but one of the WELS pastors stood up and said, "I love video chatting with my grandkids, but nothing beats hugging. Nothing beats being there in person and spending time together." That's what Paul is saying. There's something about being together to encourage each other.

Why does he need to encourage them? It says here that something is lacking in their faith. We don't know exactly what that is. You might say "They must have some big issues." In fact, the rest of the letter is really praising them. There is not a lot wrong. They have some questions and things, but notice he talks about how they want their love for the Lord to ***increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.*** It's good to look at the context to understand what might be lacking. Paul is writing the Thessalonians and if you remember, Paul went to Thessalonica but he didn't stay very long. Thessalonica sits overlooking Mount Olympus and religion was part of its core fabric, but not the Christian religion. So when Paul came to preach, he was not received well. He was kicked out and the people wanted him as far away as possible. But there were Christians that developed a church there and their faith grew and Paul even sends Timothy there to strengthen them. But what is going on there is that they are being persecuted. They are in great suffering. Why is this? It's because *the devil causes separation.* The devil was causing them to be apart but also the devil was causing them to be separated from God in a way.

I was struggling to find which word to put in here because there are a couple things you could talk about what the devil does with separation. You could say the devil here causes separation. He drives separation. And he delights in separation. All these things the devil does. He wants persecution. He wants you to be worried. He wants you to be afraid. He wants you to think that God isn't there—that He is very far away from you. That's what the devil wanted the Thessalonians to feel, so Paul wants to encourage them, to fill them up, and to know that they remain strong and the Lord is with them.

The devil causes this separation, especially through things in the world, but there is another thing that the devil does to cause separation. Do you know what that is, something we all struggle with? It's sin. You could define sin as separation. It's something that separates us and God. It separates you from others. You could say "Why is sin a really big deal? Does it really hurt anyone?" Often, what is your sin doing? Often, your sin is hurting someone next to you. You're lying to them. You're not showing love to them. And you're causing separation in your relationship. You're hurting them. That's what sin does. It's not something between you and a person. Do you know who it is between? It's between you and God. That sin separates us. We are imperfect. We fall short all the time. It says by nature we stand condemned. We are separated from God. Our sinful hearts, our sinful nature, does not desire the things of God. In fact, it is hostile to God.

So what do we need? Notice what Paul writes to them. ¹³ ***May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.*** He encourages that for us to be found holy and blameless in the presence of God. But how does that happen? Think about that separation—how can I then be in the presence of God? The only way I can be in the presence of God is because *Jesus brings us into the presence of God.*

Jesus breaks down that separation. When He died on the cross, what was torn in two? It was that curtain in the temple. We read this recently in one of the books for Sunday night, how the temple was torn from top to bottom instead of from bottom to top. This is the work of God in breaking that separation between man and God. We are full of sin and we do not deserve to be in the presence of God. I would say it's like we are oil and God is water. We are filled with inequity and He is pure and perfect, but He says that we can be found blameless and holy. The only way we can do that is if Christ takes upon himself our inequities. If Christ dies for us, if Christ removes that separation. That's what He has done. That's what He did as He went riding in on Palm Sunday. He knew His mission. He knew what He was to do—that though He came from heaven, He came to die the worst of deaths to break down that separation for you and for me. This is the beauty of what Christ has done for us. We long to be together and we can be together with God for eternity, in the Lord. But what about until that day when He returns?

We talked about how it's better together. Have you ever had to wait for anything on your own? I did a lot of traveling. If you've ever had to fly on your own, is it fun just sitting at the airport all by yourself? You get there early and you're waiting and waiting and then you fly and then you're waiting for this and waiting for that. What if you do that with one of your best friends, or with your loved ones, your family? It may be a little more chaotic, but it's a whole lot more fun to wait with someone else. Would you say it's true that *waiting together is better*?

When I was single in China and we always got to travel, my last few years when I was still single, I said "I don't want to travel by myself. I really just want to travel with others." Because waiting together is better. What does that mean for you and for me in our Christian life? It's not just waiting but it's really doing life together; to do life as Christians, together. No one should feel that they are alone and that being together really matters. What does that look like? It's like being here in worship. It's like being in Bible study, gathering together in our small groups, meeting for coffee, calling up that friend, encouraging that friend that you haven't seen here in months to say "How are you doing? I haven't seen you together with us." It's important to do this Christian life together. You are not alone. Following Jesus is certainly better when we follow Him together.

One of the best examples of this to kind of put it into reality: I had a meeting for the Chinese ministry that I'm involved with. There was a more serious thing going on and Law and Gospel needed to be applied but we're here, in America, and there is this hard thing going on in China. We have our administrative team and we're talking and we're praying about this very difficult thing. One of the men, a retired pastor with the heart of a pastor (some of you know Pastor Balza), said "I wish I could be there. I wish I could look them in the eye and show the love of Jesus. I wish I could hug them. I wish I could say 'You're forgiven.'" We can do that on the phone. We can talk about that. But to do that in person and to speak those words—life together.

If you've seen videos or the commercial for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this new movie about the German pastor who helped with the plan to try to assassinate Hitler, he said this about life together as Christians. "When I read the Bible and I read the words 'you're forgiven,' I read it all the time but there is nothing like when someone else speaks those words to you, because when I hear those words, 'Jesus loves you and you're forgiven' out of the mouth of another, it's because it's to you." It's those spoken words of Law and Gospel. Sometimes we need someone to wake us up with the Law and sometimes we need someone to speak those tender words of Gospel that you're not alone. We're all waiting for Jesus to return. We're doing that together.

One more thing to remember about that: if waiting together is something kind of hard for you now, because maybe that person you care about isn't here, remember what we are waiting together for is to be united when Christ returns; to be united with those loved ones. That's what this is all about, of being together with the Lord.

When you see all the movies about traveling and being together, yes, it's such a blessing to be together with family. It's such a blessing to rejoice in what it means to be together as a Christian family, so encourage one another to be here, to be in the Word. Encourage and strengthen each other, just as the Thessalonians were struggling with persecution and difficulties and they needed to be filled up in the Lord and shown that Jesus has fixed that separation to make them blameless and holy. Remember what this is all about—to be united, to be together with our Lord, with Him in eternity. So don't hold back. Don't forget to reach out to those friends that aren't here. Know that it's important for us to be together, to share that love, that Law and Gospel, and that Jesus is the one who makes us holy and blameless. Amen.

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. [\(Philippians 4:7\)](#) Amen.