

and yelled, "Pull, Fred! Pull, Jack! Pull Ted! Pull Warwick!" And the mule pulled the car out of the ditch with no trouble.

The man was so pleased and thankful and asked, "Why did you call all those other names before you called Warwick?"

And the farmer said, "Old Warwick is just about blind. As long as he believes he's part of a team, he doesn't mind pulling."<sup>1</sup>

The Christian life is meant to be lived as part of a team. We can make it through debilitating disease, disappointment, divorce, discouragement, job displacement, and family dysfunction if we are part of a community.

If you are not part of an active Christian community, I want to encourage you during Advent to join one and become involved. It can be your Advent gift to yourself.

The second thing that Paul prays is that our love will increase. "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you."

*The Rabbi asked his students, "How can we determine the hour of dawn, when the night ends and the day begins?"*

*One student suggested, "When, from a distance, you can distinguish between a dog and a sheep?"*

*"No," the Rabbi answered.*

*"Is it when you can distinguish between a fig tree and a grapevine?" asked another.*

*"No," the Rabbi answered again.*

*"Please tell us the answer then," the students said.*

*"It is," said the wise teacher, "when you have enough light to look human beings in the face and recognize them as your brothers and sisters. Until then the*

*darkness is still with us."*<sup>2</sup>

As long as we define people by their race, gender, or sexual orientation, we are living in the darkness and have not yet learned love. Advent invites us to increase in love as we wait for Jesus to come.

Finally, Paul prays that we be strengthened in holiness. "And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."

The first two parts of this prayer concern our relationship to each other. This last part of Paul's prayer concerns our relationship to God. It is God who strengthens our hearts in holiness. As we live in community, as we grow in love, God works in our hearts, conforming us to God's holiness. This is God's work in our behalf.

Jesus promised that those who hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant," will be surprised. They did not know that they were doing anything special. They were just living faithfully.

And that is the way it is. Jesus is coming. Advent reminds us. Live well until he arrives.

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Infipro newsletter, January, 2005, taken from, James Moore, Some Folks Feel the Rain. . . Others Just Get Wet.

<sup>2</sup> Henri Nouwen, Signs of the Times, no page number.



FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH

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# The Pulpit Ministry



December 3, 2006  
First Sunday of Advent

A Prayer for  
Advent

1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

Rev. Dr. Kenneth A. Corr, Pastor  
200 E. Parkway N.  
Memphis, Tennessee 38112

*It is late, but the lights are still on and the old man sits at his desk, leaning over the stationery looking for just the right words to express his deep affection. His heart is full, overflowing with tender emotions. His thoughts turn to good memories of times together and he longs for those times again. How can he express what he wants to say? The old man sharpens his pencil and rubs his brow. Without even realizing what he is doing, his writing becomes a prayer.*

The old man is not a parent writing to his children, although he could be. The feelings expressed are the feelings of a parent to a child. But this is a pastor writing to his congregation.

The apostle Paul founded the church at Thessalonica. He was forced by persecution to leave too early and, like a parent, he worried about his children. If you are a parent, you understand. Were they doing okay? Had they kept the faith? Were they growing? Were they suffering from persecution? Did they remember him fondly? More than once, he had tried to visit, “but,” he said. “Satan blocked our way.”

Finally, when he could not stand it any longer, he sent Timothy to check on everyone. And now, Timothy had returned and “has brought us the good news of your faith and love. He has told us also that you always remember us kindly and long to see us—just as we long to see you.”

And with that news, Paul sat down to write this letter. If we listen with our hearts, we can smell the midnight oil burning, we can hear the pen scratching on the paper, we can feel the old apostle’s heart aching, struggling to find just the right words when he says, “How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you?”

The right words seemed to escape him. What Paul really wanted was to see them face to face and to be with them in person. “Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith.” And then spontaneously, Paul begins to pray. What does this pastor pray for the church? We believe that this is God’s Word for us today. What does the ancient apostle pray for us? This prayer is still in effect for *this* church.

Today is the beginning of Advent. It is the official beginning of the countdown to Christmas. But Advent is more than just a reminder that Jesus came. Advent is Janus-like, two-faced. It invites us to look backwards to that first incarnation, but also to look ahead to his coming again. Advent is our annual reminder that regardless how hopeless things may seem, time is moving towards an ultimate goal. Advent is our annual reminder that regardless how hard life may be, it is to be lived with anticipation. And that is difficult, especially at Christmas, especially in our consumer culture.

Step back in time for a minute in your imagination. Try to imagine that you are living, not in the twenty-first century, but the first century. Try to imagine that you were a part of that small synagogue in Nazareth in the first century. All your life, you have heard that messiah is coming. All your life, you have celebrated the annual Passover with the preached promise that one day the messiah will come to the temple. All your life, you have heard the Scriptures announcing his arrival. And you believe it, but not really. I mean, you believe that it is true, but you really don’t expect it to happen in your life time.

And then, it really happened. “The

Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” It was not just a theological theory or a preacher’s promise. In the fullness of time, God became incarnate. Go figure! Who would have thought it would really happen in their lifetime.

Now jump ahead to the twenty-first century. All your life, you have heard that Jesus is coming again. All your life, you have celebrated the Christmas event with the promise that he is coming again. All your life, you have been told that life is moving towards an ultimate goal. And you believe it, but not really. I mean that you believe that it is true, but it doesn’t really give you much comfort in midst of the daily struggles of our world. But Advent challenges us to reconsider our attitude. Advent invites us to develop an attitude of anticipation for living. And that is exactly what Paul prays for the church. Look again at this prayer. How does this prayer help us to focus on Advent hope?

First, Paul prays that he will be reunited with the church. “May our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you.”

While we wait for the final consummation, we need each other. We need to encourage each other; we need to learn from each other; we need to pray with each other; we need to be together. Life is easier when lived in community.

A man drove his car into a ditch out in the country and walked to the nearest farmhouse to seek help. He told the old farmer what had happened and asked if he could help him. The old farmer pointed to a haggard looking old mule and said, “Old Warwick can do the job.”

So the two men and Warwick the mule went to the ditch where the car was stuck. The old farmer hitched the mule to the car