2nd Sunday in Advent – Year A – December 8, 2013 – Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY

Based on Acts 3:19-26 written by Pastor Paul Horn

Repent and Turn to God

I. So that your sins may be wiped out…

II. …and times of refreshing may come.

*19 Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out,* *that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, 20 and that he may send the Christ,* *who has been appointed for you--even Jesus. 21 He must remain in heaven* *until the time comes for God to restore everything,* *as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.* *22 For Moses said, 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you.* *23 Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.'* *24 "Indeed, all the prophets* *from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. 25 And you are heirs* *of the prophets and of the covenant* *God made with your fathers. He said to Abraham, 'Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.'* *26 When God raised up* *his servant, he sent him first* *to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways."*

What traditions does your family have for Christmas time? I think it would be difficult for me to change your mind about the traditions you have. Most of your traditions have been an annual event for years, maybe even generations. Sometimes you have to change your mind about your Christmas traditions. Sometimes people move and they can’t do things they once did… like ice skating on Year Years’ Eve at the outdoor skating rink. Or people get married and are forced to compromise. Are we going to spend Christmas at home or travel? Are we going to put white lights on the tree or multi-colored lights? Are we going to have turkey or ham for Christmas dinner or throw in frozen pizzas and appetizers?

Well, that’s what God is telling us this morning from our lesson Acts chapter 3. He wants you to change your mind… not about your family traditions, but He says, “Repent and turn to me! Repent and turn so that your sins may be wiped out, and that times of refreshing may come.”

I. So that your sins may be wiped out

One of traditions I had as a child was the JC Penny Christmas catalog. My sisters and me would rifle through it no less than twenty or thirty times and create our Christmas list. To draw up a Christmas list assumes that your name is in the “Nice” column and not on the “Naughty” list.

In our lesson this morning the Apostle Peter had made his own naughty list, so to speak. Let me set the stage: Peter and the Apostle John were walking through a gate onto the temple grounds in Jerusalem. A man who had been crippled from birth was laid at that gate every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. As Peter and John were about to enter the temple they stopped at this man’s feet and Peter said to him, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, walk!” And immediately strength came to the man’s ankles and knees, his muscles shook off their apathy and he stood up and he walked, and then he jumped and then he ran through the whole temple courtyard praising God.

This of course grabbed the attention of all the worshipers, who may have numbered in the hundreds or even thousands! And they swarmed around Peter and John and this man who had been miraculously healed. Peter addressed the crowd and asked them, “Why are you surprised? As if it was by our power that this man is healed? The God of the Jews, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he is the one who worked through us, he is the one who has glorified Jesus.” As soon as Peter dropped that name, Jesus, a dagger drove through the hearts of the people. It was no less than 50 days ago that these same people had cried out to their Roman governor for the death of this great rabbi from Nazareth. Here’s where the naughty list comes in… Peter then said to them, You handed him over to be killed. You disowned him in front of Pontius Pilate, even though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One. You asked for a murderer to be released. You killed the author of life.” (Acts 3:13-16) And then his purpose for showing them why their names belonged on the naughty list came: “Repent and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.”

It is easy for us to sit here and point out where those Jews went wrong. It’s obvious. They murdered our dear Savior. They belong on the “Naughty List.” But for you and me to confess, “I need to be on the naughty list,” that’s a difficult task to accomplish. The reality is that none of us wants to admit we’re wrong. We want to be right. When someone offers constructive criticism or worse yet, points out our faults, we instantly get defensive. But the fact is, you and I need God the Holy Spirit to point out our faults, our sins against him, so that you and I know we do belong on the naughty list. Reason for that? We’ll get to in just a minute.

First of all, how does Holy Spirit convince you that you have done wrong? Well, he takes your life and holds it up to all of God’s Ten Commandments and asks, “How well have you kept these?” This morning in our Advent Gathering Rite we basically went through all the commandments, didn’t we?

“I have not always carried out my responsibilities as a husband.” Husbands, have you been the faithful spiritual leader in your home? Have you always been loving and forgiving of all your family members? “I have not always carried out my responsibilities as a wife.” Wives, have you always been the helper or companion to your husband, supporting him and forgiving him and being patient with him?” I have not always carried out my responsibilities as a single person.” Have you respected God’s boundaries for sex and marriage?

I have not always carried out my responsibilities as a parent or child, as employer or employee, as a teacher or student.” Have you shown respect and patience at all times with these individuals? “I have not always loved God with all my heart.” That’s true… I’ve loved other things more than God. “I have not always gladly heard his Word.” Do you look at reading your Bible as the highlight of your day or something that gets in the way of precious TV time? Do you look at going to church as a burden or a joy? “at times, I have been dishonest, proud, and unforgiving.” Yes, that describes me. “At times, I have been selfish, lazy, envious, and quarrelsome.” Yes, that’s me, too. “I do not always speak in a way that builds others up, but instead tears them down.” Yes, that describes me as well. “I often allow indecent thoughts to linger in my mind.”

Yes, the Holy Spirit has more than convinced me that I belong on the naughty list, and the consequences are more serious than a lump of coal in my stocking this Christmas. But the Holy Spirit must point out my faults, so that I repent. Repentance is nothing more than turning away from sin and turning to God for forgiveness. Repentance is having a change of mind and heart. I must change my mind about the things that I have been doing. They are not right. In true repentance I cannot justify my actions, I cannot excuse my attitude, I cannot blame my words on someone else’s actions.

And what follows is confession. In repentance we confess our sins, we admit that we are sincerely sorry for what we have done against God. But repentance is more than confession. For even Judas Iscariot confessed that he betrayed his Jesus. But that’s all the further he went. Because afterwards he went and committed suicide. Repentance is more than saying sorry just because you got caught. Repentance is more than the desire to amend your life and start new. Repentance is a change in your whole heart and mind, repentance is changing your attitude about the things you have done and said and thought. Repentance not only turns away from sin and confesses, but then it looks to God for forgiveness. In faith turn to God and trust that he has wiped out all of your sins.

When Santa looks at the naughty list, he reaches for his bag of coal. When God looked at the naughty list, he said, “I have to do something about this. Sinners must be punished.” And he looked at the nice list and saw only one name, Jesus.

Did Jesus always carry out his responsibilities as a single person? Yes he did. Did he always carried out his responsibilities as a child and a student? Yes, he was perfectly obedient to his parents and teachers. How about as a teacher? Yes, Jesus always demonstrated patience and love for his students, his disciples. Did Jesus always love God with all his heart? Yes. Did Jesus always gladly hear God’s Word? Yes. At times was he dishonest, proud, and unforgiving? No. He was truthful, humble and forgiving all the time. Was he ever selfish, lazy, envious, and quarrelsome? No. He was selfless, active in his ministry, content and lived in peace with everyone. Did he speak in ways that built others up? Yes. He had no need to repent. It is that perfect life of obedience, the white robe of righteousness of Christ, which God used to wipe out all of your sins, to erase your name from the naughty list.

And then God used the blood of Jesus, shed on the cross, where was being punished for your sins and mine, that blood God used to write your name in his book, the Book of Life. The Book of Life, the list of all people who, by God-given faith repent, turn from their sins and turn to God and trust that he has already wiped out all of their sins through Jesus. Your name, my friend, is written in God’s Book of Life. Your name has been wiped out of the naughty list. You are forgiven by Christ.

That’s repentance… the Holy Spirit convincing you of your sins against God, the Holy Spirit convincing you to change your mind about your sins, and then he works in you the humility to turn to God and provides the faith to trust that God has indeed wiped out all of your sins through Jesus. Repent, and turn to God, so that you will always know that your sins are wiped away, and that times of refreshing may come.

II. So that times of refreshing may come

You might not think of the pre-Christmas time as a time of refreshment or rest. You may have parties to plan and attend, you have rehearsals for church choir and the school band program, exams and tests to take at the end of the semester, you have traditions to keep - decorations to hang, travel plans to make, gifts to purchase and wrap, cookies to bake and cards to send in the mail.

But for Christians, Advent is exactly that: a time of refreshment through repentance. At first, that just doesn’t sound right – repentance… refreshing? They do say that confession is good for the soul, but there’s so much more in repentance for you from your God and Savior. When, in faith, you turn from sin and turn to him for forgiveness, it is here in his Word and in Baptism and Lord’s Supper that you find refreshment.

Listen to these words from Isaiah, “I have made you, you are my servant; I will not forget you. I have swept away your offenses like a cloud, your sins like the morning mist. Return to me, for I have redeemed you. You are mine.” (Isaiah 44:22) Isn’t that refreshing? In baptism Jesus promised you, “He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the HS, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.” (Titus 3:4-7)

In the Lord’s Supper Jesus promised you, “Take and eat, this is my body give for you. This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you, for the forgiveness of sins.”

Refreshing, isn’t it? Yes, in repentance we find refreshment. In Advent, we prepare for Christ through repentance. So can I convince you to start a new tradition this pre-Christmas season of Advent? One of the fondest memories I have, from when I was a young boy... every Christmas my father set out an Advent wreath, very similar to this one, on our kitchen table. And on most evenings in December, after dinner, my sister would turn off the lights, I would light the candle, and my father would read out of our devotion book. His words pointed us to the baby who would be arriving in the manger in Bethlehem, his words pointed us to the cross and empty tomb, his words pointed us to the skies, reminding us that Jesus was going to come again. When Christ comes, as Peter said in our lesson, and when he does come, “God will restore everything, as he promise long ago through his holy prophets.”

He will restore this sinful human flesh, and my stubborn will and make it new. I will not need to repent, for I will always do what God wishes from me. When Jesus comes and restores all things you and I will find true lasting eternal refreshment and rest. So we pray as we prepare this Advent, “Come Lord Jesus, prepare our hearts through your Word and help us to repent, and to find in you the wiping away of our sins, and the times of refreshment. Come quickly, and restore to us the joy of your salvation. Amen.”