

Happy New Year! Today is the first Sunday of Advent and the first day of the new Church year.

However, our readings today focus on finales, not beginnings. It is important for us to remember that Advent is as much about preparing for Jesus' return at the end of time as it is for preparing for his arrival as a baby in Bethlehem.

Advent is a time of waiting and preparation and a time that teaches us patience. The season of Advent invites us to look with clarity at ourselves as people who have been given everything we need to endure.

The four Sundays of Advent are structured like this:

The first Sunday deals with our readiness for divine judgement.

The second the Ministry of John the Baptist. The third the Baptist's call for repentance and the fourth is the narrative of Jesus' birth.

Today - the start of Advent Paul's words to the Corinthians reminds us that we have been given all the Spiritual gifts - we lack for nothing. And we do this together - in fellowship and in community.

Paul's letter begins by bidding us grace, peace, knowledge, strength, intensified personal gifts and life with the risen Christ. Not a bad start to the Advent season. We need these blessings all through the year but even more right now. All around us is busyness, all around us is stress and activity and the consumer rush to Christmas.

But we are taking a time out. We will space our preparations over four weeks. We will take time each week to pause, to give thanks, to praise our God and to prepare for the coming of the Christ child. This is good for our minds and hearts and souls. Lets take Paul's blessings for peace and grace and strength and knowledge.

As Lutherans we see and hear these words from Paul as "Gospel" these are the words that are the good news of life from God.

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians probably in in the year 55. He was writing to a community that was deeply divided over very human things. They had divisions based on money, status, position and gifts. There was alot of bragging and boasting going on in Corinth!

We need to remember when we hear or read these words that we are eavesdropping on a conversation and only hearing one side. There were probably other letters that did not survive.

Paul as the letter unfolds, Paul will cajole and lecture and asks the people of Corinth to repent of the sins that have fractured the community. Paul will ask them not to rely on earthly values that divide, like power, wealth or knowledge.

But in the beginning of the letter Paul chooses his words very carefully and gives thanks and blessings. Giving thanks for the unifying gift of grace in Jesus Christ.

Paul has faith in this community. He knows that they have problems - all communities do. But this community is special - this community will be sustained because God is faithful.

Paul is a Pastor first and foremost at the beginning of this letter. Pastor's offer blessings. Grace and peace are what the people of the Church in Corinth needed!

Paul is able to discern the gifts and promises of the people. His words of blessing and thanksgiving may give the people of Corinth encouragement and help them get back on track. Paul's thanksgiving leaves no room for human boasting. He is letting them know that everything comes from God. A good reminder for us as well!

God is the source of all. There is no place for superiority or inferiority. All are equal. The people of Corinth all had God's grace. We all have God's grace.

God's grace is the source of the community of Corinth's peace. God's grace is the source of our peace. And this grace is not forgiveness - it is active, inspiring - more like the Holy Spirit. Grace is the source of the gifts of the community of Corinth. Grace is the source of the gifts of our community.

Paul tells the people of Corinth - and us- that grace is what empowers us as disciples. Grace means that we can take our gifts and share them. And as Paul reminds the people of the Church of Corinth all gifts are to be regarded equally.

AMEN