

Advent IV

(Note: On Christmas Eve and Day, Divine Services are in place of family devotions.)

Monday Mark 10:23-27

Sorely Hindered By Sins

We say in the Collect for the Fourth week of Advent that "We are sorely hindered by our sins." That is not entirely accurate. The "sorely" part is true; it means extremely or in a painful manner. Truly our sins are extreme and they are painful to us and others. But the idea that we are merely hindered by sins might be misleading.

Scripture tells us that in our sins we are blind, dead, enemies of God. It is not that we do not see God clearly; in our sins, we do not see Him at all. It is not that we are merely sick in our sins; no we are stone cold dead. And it is not even that we are dead, even in our deadness we are still enemies of God. We are still on the battlefield, still charging the castle, still firing our weapons, and it is the loving, holy, and true God that we fight against.

Can you see why Jesus can tell the disciples who wondered who at all could be saved that such things are impossible for people? It is not that we are just a little hindered from entering the kingdom of God, as if we just cannot see the door clearly. No, as blind people it is impossible to see the kingdom let alone the door. It is not that our weak, sick bodies hinder us from making it across the drawbridge into the kingdom. No, our dead bodies cannot drag themselves up the stairs. And it is not because we do not try hard enough to be friends of God that we are hindered from being friends. No, in our sinfulness we are sworn enemies.

Thank God that He does the impossible. He saves what cannot be saved. He makes the blind to see, the dead to live, and enemies to be His friends. That is why soon we will hear angels shout from the night skies and shepherds run as fast as they can to the manger. God is doing what cannot be done. God is doing the impossible. He is saving sinners like us.

Prayer: Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come among us with great might; and because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Tuesday John 1:16

Bountiful Grace

We pray in the Collect for the Fourth Week of Advent for our Lord's "bountiful grace." Tonight's Bible reading goes like this in the King James Version: "And of His [Jesus] have we all received, and grace for grace."

Jesus is all grace. He is not some law and some grace or some requirement and some grace, but grace for grace. There is so much grace in Jesus that no amount of your sins can outweigh it. St. Paul says that where sins abound, there grace abounded much more. The more sins we have the more grace Jesus has to cover them. How can I be so sure that Jesus has enough grace to cover your sins even though I do not know what they are? Because there is sufficient grace in Jesus to cover the sins of an entire world. If an entire world's sins can be covered by the grace of God in Jesus, then certainly any individual's sins are covered.

But you know "bountiful" is a hard word to get a picture of. We speak of a "bountiful" harvest and "bountiful" blessings but how much is bountiful? More than anyone will ever need or use. So much that it is surprising like the widow in the Old Testament. She had a jar of flour with only a handful in it and jar of oil that just had a little bit left in it, enough to make her and her son one more meal. But the Lord commanded her to feed His prophet Elijah first and promised they would not run out till the Lord ended the famine. Well, the widow poured flour and oil from those jars everyday and they never ran out. Surely, she must have thought from time to time, "Today it will run out." But, nope there was enough each and every day. And so Jesus' grace to us does not run out. It may look little and not enough to cover our sins some days. But, SURPRISE there is enough; there is more than enough each and every day. Even today. Especially at Christmas.

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Wednesday Galatians 4: 4-5

Speedily Helped

We pray in this Collect for the Fourth Sunday that our Lord would "speedily help" us. Sometimes though it does not seem that God helps fast enough.

Imagine how it was for the people in the Old Testament. They lived day to day from the promise that God would send His Christ. They gathered around their tables for family devotions just like you are gathering around yours now. Their parent told them what your parent tells you. "Soon our Lord will send His Christ, His Messiah to crush the head of the serpent, bear our sins, and carry our sorrows." Adam told his family this. Noah told his. Job told His. Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Malachi told theirs. But year after year, decade after decade, century after century went by, and still the Christ did not show up.

But Paul tells us in our Bible reading that God did send His Son, the Christ, at just the right time. He was not slow in fulfilling His promise. He did it at exactly the right moment. But you know how it is when you are waiting for something. It seems to take forever. If you have ever waited for a fish to bite, it seem to take a long time. You know how long it takes for a birthday to arrive. And did not it seem like Christmas would never get here?

From our viewpoint, that of waiting, it does seem that our Lord takes His time to help and deliver us. But our God is not slow says Peter in his second letter. He always has His exact moment to act and nothing can rush Him or make Him forget to act. Because we know He sent His Son to rescue us from sin, death, and the power of the devil at just the right time. Because we have been eternally helped by His acting, We can know that any delays or long waits are not goofs in His plans. He is waiting to deliver us at just the right moment. Would not you think it funny if a fisherman pulled up time and again with no fish on the end? He sits there motionless. But you know he is waiting and waiting because it is just not time to act. So it is with our Lord. He may appear to be motionless sometimes, but that is only because it is not time for Him to act. But He will, and when He does, look out. There is Christmas. There is help in big way!

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Thursday Hebrews 2: 14-15

Why Did He Come?

Jesus did not come to make us rich. Jesus did not come to make us happy. Jesus did not come so that We would never be sick. Our Bible reading is very clear about why Jesus came. It tells us Jesus came in flesh and blood because we have flesh and blood. He came in a body like us, just the way we come into the world, because He came to redeem us. He could not take our place under the Law unless He was one of us. He could not fulfill the commandments given to men unless He was a man. He could not be punished in place of humans unless He was a human being. Even in the days when men could have someone else take their place in the army, no army let a dog or a monkey take the place of a man. Nope, saving mankind was something only a man could do.

Jesus, says Hebrews, came so that "He might destroy him who holds the power of death - that is the devil." In the Lord's Prayer we always pray, "Deliver us from evil." You could translate that, "Deliver us from the Evil One." It is a prayer directly against the Evil One, the devil. Jesus came into the manger specifically to destroy Satan. A Christmas hymn sings of His infant hands strangling the Serpent. The reason We can make fun of Satan at Halloween time is because at Christmas time we celebrate the birth of Him who came and destroyed his power over us.

So you know what that means? Satan had held us in slavery by the fear of death which he held over our heads. He said, "I've got you. You are going to die, and come to be with me in hell forever." Christ says, "Not so fast Devil. I have come to free these people from you." And Jesus does. He climbed into our flesh and blood and under the Law, the very Law that Satan was going to use to damn us. By keeping that Law, He took it from over our heads. And not only that, but He died the death we deserve for not keeping it. He died our death, so we do not have to. We do not face death with the Law over our heads or our sins on our back. We face death as sons and daughters who belong in heaven. As a Christmas hymn by Luther says, "Let Hell and Satan rage and chafe,/ Christ is your Brother ye are safe." And, "Made like yourselves of flesh and blood,/ Your brother is the eternal God."

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Friday John 1:18

What Does God Look Like?

A mother was trying to talk to her daughter about God. The child was very curious and wanted to know what God looked like. The mother tried to explain this and that, but the explanations only perplexed the girl. Finally she said, "Why does not He just stick His head out of heaven so we can see Him." The Good News of Christmas is that not only did God stick His head out of heaven, He stuck His hands, body, and feet too!

If you want to know what God looks like, do not picture a bright light, do not picture a hot fire, picture Jesus. See Jesus welcoming the little children into His arms; that is what God looks like. See Jesus holding little lambs in His strong arms like the Good Shepherd that He is; that is what God looks like. See Jesus hanging on a cross bearing the sins of the world; that is what God looks like. We need to have no other picture of God than Jesus. Actually, God does not want us to have any other picture. He tells us in today's reading, "No man has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made Him known."

If you want to know what God looks like, look at Jesus. If you want to know what God does, look at Jesus carrying your sins, wanting you to ask Him things, delighting to help you. If you want to know what God thinks about you, look at Jesus thinking only thoughts of love, acceptance, and peace. People want to have a complicated, sometimes scary view of God, but Jesus puts such nonsense to rest when He tells us in John 14. "The one who has seen Me has seen the Father."

There's my God in the manger, in His mother's arms, dying on the cross, calling constantly for sinners who are weak and loaded with burdens to come to Him for rest. What a great looking God!

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Saturday Isaiah 9:6

For Us

When you open Christmas presents if you have more than one child in the family, you go through many, "Who is it for?" and "Is it for me?" questions. Of course, the only way you can know for sure is by whose name is on the package. What a dilemma are presents that turn up with no name.

At Christmas you should see in large big letters the words FOR US written over everything. Yes, on the manger see the words, "For You." On Baby Jesus Himself, see the tag dangling from His foot. The 'From:' is AGod≅ and the 'To:' AFor Us.≅ Everything that God gives us at Christmas is FOR US.

It matters not how poor of Christians we have been; it matters not even if we have not been Christians at all. God did not give His own Son to just good Christians, or even to just Christians. The 'To:' part says ≅For Us.≅ Anyone who sees Baby Jesus in the manger can go up to it and read that He is there for them. It does not matter whether they have been good or bad, naughty or nice, Jesus is on the scene for them.

There is no other gift like this. We give gifts to people because we are related to them. We give gifts to people based on their age. We give gifts very often to people just because they give one to us. That is not how God is. There is nothing in us that made Him give us His Son. And there is nothing in us that can make the gift not for us.

So we must see the words "FOR US" written thick and black over everything. We need not wonder if this Jesus who carries my sins and sorrows really be for me. We need not be concerned if we have not given enough to God - who really could? No, Jesus is "For Us," all because God wants to give Him to us. The certainty of Christmas is found in the heart of God; it is found in the actions of God. God did not look to see who had been what; He did not check this or that list. Nope from all eternity He said, "The world needs a Savior, Someone to deliver them from Satan. I am going to send Jesus for them." And He did. FOR US.

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