

December 30, 2018 – Colossians 3:12-17

Christmas is a time of many things. A time to remember Christ's birth. A time of giving. A time together with family and friends. A time of traditions and celebration.

But, for most people, Christmas is also a time for one more thing: vacations. Whether you're a student enjoying two weeks without school, or an adult enjoying a few precious days off of work, Christmas is a time when people get away from their jobs. A time to enjoy a break from the winter routine of getting up before dawn and coming home after dusk and never seeing the sun in between.

I know I certainly took a vacation. After three straight days of worship services, December 26th was firmly marked in my calendar as a day off. And I was more than ready for it when it finally came.

Most of us will get one more day like that this next week for New Years Day. But then it's back to the dark, monotonous winter. A return to work. A return to school. A return to boring normalcy.

That's how life is sometimes. Weeks and weeks of drab routine punctuated by brief moments of vacation and relaxation and special moments with family and friends. In fact, that's what a lot of the church's calendar is like. To put it in terms of liturgical colors, we have brief moments of blue and purple and red and white, followed by long, long expanses of green.

Which means that, while it's great to revel in the high points of the church year, the greater challenge to us is to take that high point and stretch it out over the entire year. So that in the middle of the inevitable post-Christmas crash, we can still hold onto a little nugget of Christmas meaning to get us through the days ahead.

On Christmas Eve, I talked in my sermon about the good news of great joy that the angels brought to the shepherds. The good news that God was not bring war against humanity, but bringing peace on earth through his Son. Peace between God and man that hadn't existed since the Garden of Eden.

St Paul makes reference to that in our epistle lesson today. He says, *"Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body."*

One body, called to peace. That's an easy thing to say, but not quite so easy to do. How, exactly, do we take that peace God gave us in the angels' message and turn it into something that unites us as one body and rules over our hearts, persisting well past Christmas into our entire lives?

Well, first of all, we have to remember who we are. Paul addresses us as *"God's chosen ones, holy and beloved."* We are God's chosen people. Or maybe an even better way to phrase it would be to say, "You are God's chosen person." Because while it's all well and good to talk about ourselves collectively, I think we miss the very personal nature of being chosen.

We talk about the Israelites of the Old Testament as the "chosen people," but they were chosen by ethnicity and nationality. We are chosen by adoption. To put it in Jesus' words, they were the tree and we are each individual branches grafted onto it, each one specifically chosen and put in its exact place.

Chosen by Holy Baptism. Chosen by faith when you heard God's Word to you. Chosen when God put his Holy name upon you and washed you clean of all your sins. God chose each one of you to be a part of his family in this specific place at this specific time. By God's sovereign choice, you are each holy and each dearly loved.

And so when Paul calls us to clothe ourselves with these virtues of compassion and kindness and humility and gentleness and patience, and when he asks us to bear with each other and forgive each other out of love, he's not doing it out of desperation. This is not Paul begging us to work and work and work at something that he really doesn't expect to occur.

No, he's very clear: "*Put on then, AS God's chosen people...*" These aren't instructions on how to be God chosen people. No, you already are his chosen people. And it's because you are his chosen people that he knows this will work.

It's as if Paul is saying, "Give it a shot. Try on some of these virtues for size. Think before you speak and act. You are already one body, so try acting like it. God has chosen you. God has made peace with you through his Son. So be a beacon of peace in your church. Forgive each other as Christ has forgiven you. Demonstrate the peace of God right where you are."

Moreover, Paul tells us, you can encourage peace in your personal lives as well. For one, be thankful. Paul just lays it out there. Be thankful. Before you complain. Before you get discouraged. Before you get frustrated. Stop and be thankful for what you have, for what God has done for you, and for what God has promised to give you on the last day.

And finally, let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly. Yes, that does definitely mean reading scripture and having personal devotions. But Paul tells us it means more than that. He says to let the Word dwell in you richly "*teaching and admonishing one another.*"

In other words, go to Bible class. Go to a Bible study. Form your own Bible study. Give yourself opportunities to interact with other Christians and bring the Word alive through each other.

Not only that, but let the Word dwell in you richly as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. You know, Lutherans have a long and rich musical history. Martin Luther himself was a hymn writer.

The reason for that is simple: people learn through songs. It's one of the easiest ways to teach something. How many of you, when you're sorting through something alphabetically, will actually hear the Alphabet Song in the back of your mind? I can't be the only one. We learned the alphabet through song and it stuck with us.

God's Word is the same way. We sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs and they stick with us. The Word of God dwells with us richly through them. It always has, back into the ancient days of the church and even back into the Israelites. That's what the book of Psalms is. The hymnal of the Israelites.

But, you'll notice, there's a common theme in everything Paul is saying here. Forgiving each other as we're also forgiven by Christ. Coming together as one body in a bond of peace and love. Dwelling on the Word of God. Teaching and admonishing in all wisdom. Singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

What St Paul is describing here is corporate worship. It's the divine service. It's this, what we're doing here right now. This is what God's chosen people do. They gather together in a bond of forgiveness, peace, and love to dwell on the wisdom of God's Word, hear of Christ's forgiveness, and sing songs that enrich their faith.

You want to bring Christmas into every day of your lives, it starts right here in regular worship. It doesn't end here. But it starts here.

Because there is nothing more special and more joyful than being told that you are God's chosen person, holy and beloved. There is no greater peace than the peace Christ brought us on Christmas morning. But that peace rules in your heart most of all when you are part of one body. When you come to church and thankfully hear those words of absolution given to you: I forgive you all your sins, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Christmas can't last all year. But this body of believers does. The Word of God preached from this pulpit does. The Gospel of Jesus Christ that you hear in the studies and songs of this congregation does. And the peace of Christ that rules in your hearts and that you carry from this place? That definitely lasts all year too. Amen.