

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
December 5, 2010**

Matthew 18:18-20

Marvel At Our Advent King's Promises!

He is:

- 1) Present as we gather together***
- 2) Powerfully with us in our church's ministry***

**Hymns: "Come To Us, Immanuel" – 29 –
Distribution: 566, 14, 3 – 12**

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

Matthew 18:18-20 –

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Familiarity breeds contempt!

So they say. I remember seeing this concept five years ago, when Professor Randy Bode visited our area. Randy Bode's father is Pastor David Bode, who was the first pastor at Holy Trinity in the 1960's and 70's. After the Bode family moved out of the area in the 80's, Randy hadn't been back to visit the area. It was interesting seeing Randy's reaction as he toured around our area. He was floored by the beauty of Mt. Rainier and the Olympic Mountains. He was amazed that our location is so close to the water. He couldn't believe the other scenic places that are nearby. It left him saying, "Where was my head back then? Wasn't I paying attention? Didn't I know all these breathtaking sights were in my own backyard?"

We shouldn't be surprised, because familiarity breeds contempt. Newness wears off. The spectacular becomes commonplace. It can

happen with the things we buy, even blockbuster purchases like cars and houses. It can happen to a married couple who were so enamored of each other, but now the magic has been replaced with that humdrum feeling.

Can it happen in our attitude toward God? Can it happen with our attitude toward our church? As we gather for a neat worship service on a Sunday when we're all together in one service, it's a good day to ask that question. Have you stopped marveling at the wonders of God?

With that thought in mind, we read our text from Matthew 18:18-20: *"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."*

Today let's be encouraged in Matthew 18 to **"Marvel at Our Advent King's Promises!"** **We will see that in an amazing way, he is:**

- 1. Present as we gather**
- 2. Powerfully with us in our church's ministry**

1 – Jesus said in Matthew 18:20 says, *"Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."* It's a simple concept, really. Jesus says that where his people gather, there he comes to be present. The detail that jumps out at us is the fact that where even just two or three come together, there he is! Even for a small group Bible study. Even for a Monday night service. Even for a family in their home.

An amazing fact about this is whom God is choosing to come and spend time with. I remember a few times growing up when my family was driving in the car and suddenly we found ourselves in a neighborhood that we had not planned on driving through – an unfamiliar neighborhood with bars on windows, tough characters staring at people driving by in cars, and litter lying around. I remember my mom saying a few times, "Lock your

doors! We don't want to get stopped while we're driving through here!" I'm sure she hoped that we wouldn't have a breakdown before we had found our way to a more familiar place.

Imagine where God is coming when he tells us, "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." He's coming to be near... YOU! That's right, an ugly sight. Spiritually, we have nothing but sins to offer. And as Isaiah writes, "All our righteous acts are like filthy rags." (64:6) There is no reason God should choose to drive by your neighborhood or want to stop to spend time. Yet in his grace he does. God is so holy that he had to change your condition before the two of you could be acquainted and on good terms. He had to remove your sins and "clean you up." When the Father sent his Son as his ambassador to pay for your sin on the cross, he did just that. He removed your guilt. He paid your price. He gave you a robe of righteousness. And now he comes to you to be near you when we gather.

Another amazing thought about God coming to dwell with us as we gather is the fact that he is far and away more majestic than any earthly structure. When Solomon built the Old Testament Temple, he prayed a long prayer at its dedication. In it he prayed, "Will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!" (2 Chronicles 6:18-19) God's majesty is beyond our comprehension! How could Jesus ever stoop to be with us in a structure we have built as we gather in his Name? Yet he says it is so.

This is even more mysterious when we remember that Jesus is true God and also true man, even now. How can he truly be with us as true man without us seeing him? Yet he says that it is so. Amazing!

In the Old Testament we see many examples of how God showed his people that he was present as they gathered. Do you remember some?

- When the Israelites exited Egypt through the Red Sea and came to Mt. Sinai, where God would give his laws to his people, he descended on the

mountain dramatically. Exodus 24 says, "The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. For six days the cloud covered the mountain, and on the seventh day the LORD called to Moses from within the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain."

- We hear of more dramatics when Moses finished making the tabernacle during the travels of the Israelites in the wilderness: "(A) cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." (Exodus 40)
- When Solomon's Temple was dedicated, 2 Chronicles 5 tells us, "The temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud, and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God."

Yet has familiarity bred contempt with you? For example, think about church seating. If you're going to a great event in a theater or arena, what are generally regarded as the best seats? You know, the seats that people pay top dollar for? The seats that you and I honestly cannot afford and many times are occupied by only the rich and famous? Wouldn't it be at center court? Wouldn't it be in the front row? Wouldn't it be at center stage? In fact, I've known people who sit in the nosebleed seats and scan the seats below to see what better seats might be available and at what opportune time they might make a move for a good seat – in the front.

I don't anticipate this happening this morning. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen it happen on any Sunday morning. I even had confidence on this one-service Sunday that I could use this illustration and there would be seats open in the front. Why is it that in church the back seats always fill up before the good seats? Why is

it that the best seats remain empty? Have we forgotten that worship is the most powerful, exciting, and awesome event that you will be at each week?

Here's another example. How do we look at preaching? After all, I'm preaching right now. What does the word preaching mean? If you look in Webster's unabridged dictionary, you'll find this definition of the word "preach": **"To preach: to exhort in an officious or tiresome manner."** Really? Is that what people think of preaching? Is that what people think of a pastor sharing with them that despite their sin and guilt God rescued them dramatically from hell through his own Son?

How else might we show that familiarity has bred contempt for God's presence in his house?

- By poor, halfhearted participation in the worship service?
- Or by the same thing that happened to Peter, James, and John on the mount of transfiguration with Jesus? Luke 9 tells us that when this happened, "*Peter and his companions were very sleepy.*" How do you feel right now? Is it possible for you to actually fall asleep in the presence of God? And would you make excuses for it?
- Or by being habitually late for the start of church?
- By being irritated if worship goes over an hour?
- By considering skipping midweek Advent services, even though you could have made it?

If so, what has happened? **After all, he's here!** Jesus is here today with his presence. He is here with his Word; he is here with his Supper. And he also is here himself! Our thoughts should well be, "Too bad we limit this awesome event to only an hour?"

2 – Jesus our Advent King has another promise for us today. Not only is he simply

present with us as we gather, but he also said in these verses of Matthew 18, "*I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" This statement comes right after Jesus talked about Christian discipline: "*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault... If he will not listen to you, take one or two others along... If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.*" What is Jesus saying? **He says that his believers have the right to proclaim forgiveness to those who repent of their sins and to warn those who do not repent of their sins, and that he validates what his believers do. They speak and act for him.**

We also read in Matthew 18, "*Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.*" What exactly was Jesus telling his followers? When they prayed together in a truly sanctified way, with full hearts of faith and with full confidence that God would answer, God would grant what they asked. Their will would match God's will, not demanding temporal things or what their agendas dictated but having a will that their heavenly Father had. **Their sanctified prayer would be what God would see fit to grant. How amazing!**

An example of this is the occasion when Peter was imprisoned in Acts 12: "*It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also... After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. **So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.***"

Do you know the rest of the story? If not, read through Acts 12 this afternoon for your daily Scripture reading. At night Peter was miraculously wakened by an angel in his deep prison cell. The angel miraculously caused his chains to fall off and led him out of the prison. The door miraculously opened to the street and Peter walked safely to

where the Christians were gathered, eventually leaving the city for his safety. **God answered their sanctified prayers!**

What amazing blessings these two things are. God has promised to validate and bless his Church in its ministry. He has promised to be with it in its work. And he has promised to hear and answer his Church's corporate, sanctified prayers.

Yet has familiarity bred contempt? How might our faith have "cooled off" toward our church's ministry or prayer life?

- Do you feel "distant" when it comes to the work of your congregation and your opportunities to work formally for God's kingdom at Holy Trinity?
- Might opportunities to serve in our congregation be met by you with a less-than-enthusiastic attitude?
- Might you see a service opportunity in your congregation that you could fill as something that would be a "burden?"
- Might we look at a chance to be a VBS leader, a Sunday School leader, or an elected leader at church as "not worth my time?"
- Might we get depressed as we look at our church's work. Might we ask, "What's the use of trying outreach opportunities? Who will listen?"
- Might burnout set in?
- With the place our congregation is at in its history, might you feel that since our building is done, our main work is done? Or do you feel that we are just getting started in nurturing our own members in their faith and reaching out to fill our church building? Do you have an eagerness to get to the point in our church's history where we need to call a third pastor?

- Might our main thought in passing a budget for 2010 today be "We just need to get by" or "This is only possible if God is with us – And he will be!"
- Are our prayers for our congregation – its pastors and called workers, its leaders, its volunteers, its ministry – be few or even non-existent?

If so, God forgive us! God forgive us, and God give us a new attitude about the vital work of our church.

If this is the case, we need to reread these verses about how Jesus is with his Church as it does its congregational work and how he promises to hear and answer our prayers. God give us the attitude of the early Christians in the Roman world that lived and died for the faith and spread the gospel wherever they went. God give us the reminder that we have his effective, powerful Word and sacraments to nurture us and to reach out to others. God remind us in 1 Corinthians 15: "*My dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*"

God give us thoughts such as:

- "Work for his kingdom is precious work."
- "Use me in your plan, Lord!"
- "We have much to do!"
- "God will bless us as we do his work in the world!"

Familiarity breeds contempt. But may God save you from it in your life and relationship with your church! May he save us from indifference that he is with us as we gather in his Name. And may he save us from an apathy or depression toward his Church's work in the world. Finally, may he powerfully be with us as we gather and work! Amen.