

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 Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.²¹ Heaven must receive him 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 their people.’²⁴ “Indeed, beginning with Samuel, all the prophets who 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.” (Acts 3:19-26 NIV 2011)

Jesus Comes

What is a holiday? Generally speaking, holidays are days which remember and celebrate something. Thanksgiving remembers all that God has given us. The 4th of July commemorates the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Easter celebrates Jesus rising from the dead. Some of those holidays commemorate events that are so important that they have a whole season attached to them, especially in the Church. Christmas remembers that baby who was born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago and there is a whole Christmas season. But in the Church, this is NOT the Christmas season – that’s true even though your radio station is playing Christmas songs, the stores are all decked out in Christmas stuff and we’re even going to decorate our sanctuary today for Christmas. The Church’s Christmas season begins at sundown on December 24th and goes until sundown of January 5th. That’s the Twelve Days of Christmas. This is the Advent season. As you heard me say again this morning, advent means “coming.” This season celebrates what’s happening right now. Now, not just right now – we do celebrate Jesus’ coming in Bethlehem in the past, hence the tie in to Christmas. And we also look forward to his coming again at the end of the world. But this season does celebrate something that happens every day: **Jesus comes.**

I.

The incident in God’s Word that reminds us of that truth took place very shortly after the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came on the apostles in power. Peter and John were going into the temple when a crippled man asked them for a hand out. Peter and John didn’t have much money but they did have the power of the Holy Spirit. Peter said, **“In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.”** Then he grabbed the man by the arm and pulled him up and suddenly he could walk. He went into the temple courts walking and jumping and praising God. A crowd gathered to see what was happening. Peter jumped on the chance to talk about Jesus. He pointed out that those people gathered around him, on their way into the temple to observe the Old Testament laws like good Jews, those members of God’s chosen people had murdered Jesus. Pilate tried to let him go, but they had shouted “Crucify him! Crucify him!” until Pilate did. And the miracle Peter had just done in Jesus’ name showed how serious that sin was. They had crucified the Savior God had promised to send.

Pretty tough talk, wasn’t it? But Peter didn’t say these things out of spite. He said them so that they would understand that they were sinners and then he said, **“Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.”** Peter used the word repent here in the very narrow sense of be sorry for your sins. But then he called them to turn to God. Those two things together are what we call repentance today. Recognize your sin for what is and then trust in Christ to take it away.

Why should they do that? What benefit does repentance have for us? It can be a tough emotional process to go through. Nobody wants to feel guilty over their sin. Nobody wants to admit that they’ve defied God and sent Christ to the cross. If that horrible emotional “downer” was all that we could offer, why would anyone ever repent? But Peter said “Repent and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out.” Repentance is about applying what Christ did on the cross to me personally. It’s about the gospel and faith claiming me. When I kneel before my Savior and confess that I am guilty and I deserve nothing but death and hell, then I hear

his word of forgiveness: Jesus died for me. Jesus rose for me. All my sin is wiped away. That's what repentance is really about.

Peter said "Repent and turn to God so that times of refreshing may come from the Lord." That's the benefit that we get from the daily practice of repentance. God built a conscience into each of us. It's a gage, like the speedometer or the tachometer on your car. If you go 120, the speedometer tells you that you're breaking the law. The tachometer redlines and warns you that your engine can only take so much of that. And when you get a ticket, you can deny it, but you know those gages testified to the truth. When you sin, your conscience revs up and tells you that you're running the risk of eternal hell. You're defying the God who made you. It hurts to feel that. But when Christ comes and wipes your sin away, when Christ comes and tells you that he still loves you, that he forgives you, that to him, your sin is gone forever and you will live with him in heaven, that refreshes your heart. It is the only solution to guilt.

So Peter said, "Repent and turn to God so that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus." Now, when he said this, did Peter mean that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem? Obviously not. This was thirty plus years after Jesus was born. Did he mean that we should repent so that Jesus can return to judge the world? The idea of Jesus' return is in the context. But Peter was saying repent and turn to God in faith so that Christ can come into your heart again through the gospel message and comfort you in the face of your own guilt and renew your joy in the Lord even in life here.

My friends, what sins are you guilty of? We didn't stand in the crowd on that first Good Friday and shout, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" But make no mistake about it. Our sins sent Jesus to that cross just as certainly as that Jewish crowd's did. Like them, we were all born unbelievers, born enemies of God. And every one of us has made one sinful choice after another. Most of us have sins that trouble us, even years after we did them. Many of us have sins that we would never want our brothers and sisters here at church to know about. Many of us have moments when we remember what we said or did and we just feel guilty. What is the answer? God's cure is Jesus. He died and he paid. God isn't up there, just waiting to make us pay. Jesus rose and God has forgiven us. Even though we still see our sin, to God, it's already gone. Turn to God in faith so that times of refreshing may come. In the message of forgiveness, **Jesus comes to refresh our hearts.**

II.

It was always God's plan for Jesus to do that! Peter wanted the crowd in front of him to understand that and God wants us to understand it, too. Peter says something very interesting here. When he promised that Jesus will come through the message that we're forgiven, he says, "**Heaven must receive him until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets.**" Now, when Peter said these words, heaven had already received Jesus. He had ascended into heaven at least two weeks before this. But Peter's point is that heaven had to receive him because the child that was born in Bethlehem and grew up in Nazareth, the man who walked the roads of Israel and taught and preached and did miracles and then died and rose and ascended was more than just a man. He was and is the Son of God. Heaven had to receive him because God the Son won the battle for us. Heaven had to receive him because the Prince of Peace was coming home to sit at his Father's right hand until that day when Jesus returns to judge the world.

Now, that doesn't mean he's trapped there. Jesus comes to us every time we hear the gospel, as we just said. But until Judgment Day, we only know that by faith. So Peter reminds us of what Christ did for us and is still doing for us. He quoted a promise from Deuteronomy that God would raise up a prophet like Moses from among the Jewish people. God kept that promise when Jesus was born. How was Jesus like Moses? God used Moses to make the nation of Israel his covenant people. Moses led the people out of Egypt to Mt. Sinai. God appeared to them there and Moses went up onto the mountain and spoke directly to God. He had the clearest vision of God in his glory that any human being will ever have on this side of heaven. Then he brought the word of the Lord back to his people. God inspired him to write the first five books of the Old Testament.

Jesus was like Moses in all those ways, but Peter really focuses on the fact that through Jesus, God gave us a new covenant. What is a covenant? The word really means a contract. It's an agreement in which each side does its part. Under the Old Covenant, God promised that if his people followed him faithfully, he would protect them from their enemies, he would make the land so prosperous that they wouldn't be able to eat all their crops before the next harvest came in, that they would live in peace and security. But if they were unfaithful, then their enemies would own them and their crops would fail and they would live in terror and poverty. Sadly, they were not faithful to that Mt. Sinai Covenant. So God promised, already in the Old

Testament, that he would give them a new covenant. Through Jeremiah, he says, **“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel ...I will be their God, and they will be my people ... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”**

Notice how different that new covenant is: we don't do anything. God does everything. That matters, because the covenant is what made Israel God's people. The new covenant is what makes all Christians the new people of God. In Christ, God forgives our wickedness and he remembers our sins no more. Just like God took a nation of slaves and set them free and made them his own people, God has taken us, slaves to sin scattered among every nation under heaven, people have no real influence or power in our society and who deserve nothing, and he has made us his own people. That's the gift that comes from faith. When God is your God, you live under his covenant as a part of his people forever.

God promised over and over to do that. Peter says that all the prophets from Samuel on spoke of Christ coming and giving us that covenant. We are all heirs of the promises that God has been making for thousands of years. In truth, God starting giving those promises even before the Hebrew prophets spoke. Peter points back to Abraham, the ancestor of Moses and every other prophet. God promised him: **“Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.”** Jesus is the descendant of Abraham that brings a blessing to all peoples on earth.

What is that blessing? It is nothing less than paying for our sins. Jesus has paid for all the sins of all the world. There is no one on earth who is outside the payment Christ made on the cross. Now, there are many people who refuse that payment. There are many people who don't know about it. But the payment has been made. A couple of weeks ago, I was notified that I won some tickets to a concert downtown. It was something that I was entered in because of my subscription to the newspaper. When I got the e-mail, I was pretty excited – until my wife pointed that it was the Wednesday night before Thanksgiving and while the concert was going on, I'd be here leading our Thanksgiving service. But I think that experience illustrates what God did. My tickets were paid for. If I had wanted to go, they were waiting for me at the will call office at the theater. But I was too busy to pick them up. If I hadn't known where they were coming from, I might even have disbelieved the offer, figuring that it was just a scam because you can't get something for nothing. So many people refuse to believe. But we have indeed gotten something for nothing. Jesus came to bless all mankind. He died and he rose for all of us. He comes to us in the gospel and tells us that good news and gives us faith. He makes us a part of his new people. **Jesus comes to give us a new covenant.**

Most holidays point backwards, to something we're celebrating. But there's another reason to have a holiday, and you can see it in the word itself. The English word “holiday” comes from the words for “holy day.” Most holidays on our calendar really spring from the church year. They're celebrations of what Christ has done or will do or is doing for us. Advent is not one holiday, it's a season of holy days, a season in which we celebrate Christ because he keeps coming to us to forgive us, to make us a part of his people, to comfort us and strengthen us and bring us home. Rejoice in this holiday season! Amen.