



"Stir Up Our Hearts"

First Sunday of Advent
Saturday and Sunday, December 1-2, 2018
All Services

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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

Jeremiah 33:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13;
Luke 21:25-36

Grace and peace be to you from our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

As we begin this Advent Season, we're going to be doing a sermon series that talks about the variety of ways in which God can *stir us up*. So, we're talking about our hearts, our voices, our hopes and dreams, and our world. If you were to look up *stir up* in the dictionary and try to find synonyms to describe it, you might get words such as; provoke, agitate, activate. And I don't know about you but there are times in my life, especially when it's cloudy and raining and cold, that I can use words like that. To be provoked or activated in my faith and I think the church needs that as well.

If you were to grow up in an Anglican Church in England, this particular Sunday would be known as *Stir Up Sunday*. It comes from the beginning of the prayer of the day in the Book of Common Prayer, which also happened to be our prayer of the day. It begins with the words "*Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people.*"

But unfortunately Stir Up Sunday is not known for that prayer in Advent as much as it is for gathering and the custom of making Christmas pudding that you are going to eat throughout the season of Advent and Christmas.

We have gone from Stir Us Up O Lord and provoke us to love to bring us some Figgy Pudding, right now.

My wife, Linda, likes to watch the Hallmark channel especially some of those newer Christmas movies. You might know them, the romantic movies with now adult child actors and actresses that you had long since forgotten about. The story lines are always the same, boy meets girl, girl hates boy, because boy is a real estate developer who wants to buy her failing family Christmas tree farm and/or bed and breakfast in a town named after some Christmas decoration, like Garland or Holly Town and turn it into a strip mall or an office park. In the end though, hearts are stirred and everyone falls in love and lives happily ever after. Those Christmas stories are warm hearted and cutesy and predictable, and I also noticed that they

don't have Jesus anywhere. Even the Christmas carols have been scrubbed of any message of the Messiah or Savior being born.

Sit Up Our Hearts O Lord.

An *Atlantic Monthly* article recently says that there will be between 6,000 and 10,000 churches that will die this year in America. That's 150 congregations in the course of a week. One hundred years ago these churches were the center of communities where people gathered together to celebrate religious events, but also significant events in the lives of their members. And now they can't afford their ministry or their facilities and are going out with a whimper. Or for some of the former larger congregations with big structures they go out with a good redevelopment plan. St. Luke's in the Clinton Hill section of Brooklyn was founded in 1895 and quickly became one of the largest congregations in the metropolitan New York Synod. Sixty years after its founding the neighborhood changed pretty dramatically as it went from an all-German congregation to an African American congregation. At the same time there were rising costs as well as shrinking attendance and finally the congregation in 2014 had to close. The church is now being turned into townhouses and apartments. It will take you and I some serious cash for us to be able to live in God's house. The fact is though St. Luke's stopped reaching out to their neighbors over 60 years ago and finally when they wanted to try it was a too little, too late.

Thomas Friedman writing in the *New York Times* wrote a number of years ago: "You know when I really get mad? It's when my wife tells me I'm not helping around the house and I'm not helping around the house. There's nothing more enraging than someone exposing your faults and being right."

Now you might have heard our pastors talk a number of times this past year about the Q research that had come out about those who identified themselves as religiously *none*. In many cases these are 20-35-year-old millennials who had left the church. It's not that they don't believe anything, they just don't believe in Christianity any more. And many of those who are identified as "nones" tried the church. Some looked for acceptance but instead they found condemnation. Some looked for community, but instead they found cattiness. Some looked for purpose, but instead they found a boring committee meeting. "There is nothing more enraging than someone exposing your faults and being right." Stir Up Our Hearts O Lord.

The none's for example want the same thing we do, an authentic relationship with the divine. More recent studies have even suggested that they actually want to know more about Jesus and the church is in a perfect position to be able to share who Jesus is. We have in our hands and in our hearts after all, the words of Life and Grace so that people can know Jesus who is the Way and the Truth and the Life so that we can follow him and live a life of love and purpose.

Our Advent theme, *Stir Us Up* is asking that God provoke us to greater love, and what a great time to do it. It is after all the start of a new church year. A time to

be able to make a fresh resolution, a fresh start to make a difference to impact the world in whatever way we can, to stir our hearts to loving faithful action.

Paul prays to the church in Thessalonica, a church that he had founded during his second missionary journey, that God might be reflected in the lives of God's people. That's what Paul asked for.

Imagine he had helped to form a new community where people from different political, social cultural and racial backgrounds treated each other with love as if they were a family! For Paul, this was nothing less than a sign from God, a divine act which he celebrates in other letters that he writes to the church as well. It was a sign of God's dramatic work, starting something new, something the world had never seen before. And it was evidence that in Jesus and by his Spirit the living God was indeed at work in the world through the ministry of the Church.

Paul asked God to bring that work to completion. Now for Paul, he understood that there would be more hardships, more trials, more challenges, more struggles in the faith on the way. After all it's the same with us. I mean, whose life is perfect? Whose life is like a Hallmark Christmas movie? Paul knows that there is always room for us to grow and so he prays that whatever he and the church needs, that God will give it so that they can meet the challenges that are ahead of them. Not that there is anything wrong with their faith, only that faith is like a plant that needs to constantly grow, or as an older member from my first congregation in Queens, New York said; "Pastor, if you ain't growin, your dyin."

Paul is saying, Paul is praying for all of us don't get stuck in our ways. There's always an opportunity for further teaching and encouragement. There's room for all of us to be able to grow in love and to serve our neighbor in need.

The word that he uses to describe his prayer "*abound*" in Greek is a rare one. It literally means 'even more exceedingly than you can imagine.' We are to increase and abound in love for each other more exceedingly than we can possibly imagine. We ask God to stir up our hearts because God is at work in your heart, in the life of Jesus, and in the life of the church. Paul's prayer is grounded in the very character of God after all. He gives his Spirit the beginning of the creation to inspire life, he gives the word to the prophets to be able to inspire the people and he inspires disciples of then and now to follow and to serve to the very ends of the earth. Goodness, generosity, the expansive love of God overflowing and coming to you and overflowing to others.

And so, we pray, stir up our hearts so that we might live a life that is blameless, a life that is lived to the full, a life that is also holy, touched by Jesus' Spirit to serve.

We are a church, a church of followers of Jesus with hearts stirred up! To love as we eagerly await Christ's coming. Jesus word made flesh coming to rule and to serve. It is not just end times, but a new beginning, a perfection of love, mercy, and forgiveness in God's kingdom.

Stir Us Up O Lord. Amen.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

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