

Wednesday in Advent 2 2016
 Unwrapping the Gifts
 St. Ambrose, Pastor and Hymnwriter

Savior of the nations, come
 Virgin's Son, make here Your home!
 Marvel now, O heav'n and earth,
 That the Lord chose such a birth.

Not by human flesh and blood,
 By the Spirit of our God,
 Was the Word of God made flesh –
 Woman's offspring, pure and fresh [LSB 332:1-2].

You know those words. You have sung them countless times. But, what you may not know is that they were written by St. Ambrose of Milan, and why he wrote them.

“Unwrapping the Gifts” is be the theme of our mid-week Advent services. We unwrap the gift of Christmas by looking at the life and witness of some of the saints the Advent season. Because we missed St. Andrew last week, tonight, we begin by looking at St. Ambrose of Milan.

Given that, I suppose I should really begin by stating the obvious – that the very mention of remembering the saints can fill us with a sense of unease. After all, we are Children of the Reformation, right? Allow me to begin by reminding you what our Lutheran Confessions say about honoring the saints:

Our Confession approves honoring the saints in three ways. The first is thanksgiving. We should thank God because He has shown examples of mercy, because He wishes to save people, and because He has given teacher and others gifts to the Church. These gifts, since they are the greatest, should be amplified. The saints themselves, who have faithfully used these gifts, should be praised just as Christ praises faithful businessmen (Matthew 25:21, 23). The second service is the strengthening of our faith. When we see Peter's denial forgiven, we also are encouraged to believe all the more that grace truly superabounds over sin (Romans 5:20). The

third honor is the imitation, first of faith, then of the other virtues. Everyone should imitate the saints according to his calling.

Ambrose was born into a Christian family in what is today southwestern German, near the Luxembourg border, in the year 340 AD. He followed his father's footsteps as a civil servant of the Roman empire, and in about 372, was named governor of the Roman province whose capital city was Milan, Italy. He proved to be not only quite competent, but quite popular, as well. He had only been governor for about two years when the bishop died, and he was acclaimed, much to his shock, as the new bishop. Which, of course, was quite interesting because he was not even an ordained pastor when he was named bishop. Within the week, Ambrose was ordained and consecrated a bishop. He would later protest that the congregation had to be patient with him, as he was learning even as he was required to teach (cf. *Celebrating the Saints*, William Weedon, CPH, 2016).

Despite the irregularity of how he became a bishop, Ambrose proved to be the first of the great Latin Doctors of the Church. Perhaps, the greatest thing that he did was oppose Arianism. Now, I'm going to guess that's a word that you have never heard before. But, have you ever heard of the Jehovah's Witnesses, or had a conversation with a Jehovah Witness, or had a Jehovah Witness knock on your door? Then, you know all about the lie of Arianism. Remember, the devil only has so many lies, he just recycles them and gives them a new name.

What Arianism teaches, what Jehovah's Witnesses believe, is that Jesus, the Son of God, the 2nd Person of the Trinity, is a created being. That at some point in time, God the Father created the Son, which means that the nature of the Son is inferior to the nature of the Father. And, it

divides the essence of the Trinity into 3 gods, instead of 1 God in 3 distinct persons, as the Bible teaches. For example, John writes, “In the beginning was the Word {the “Word” being Christ, the Son}, and the Word {Christ} was with God, and the Word {Christ} was God” (Jn 1:1). The Nicene Creed was written to combat the heresy of Arianism. This is why the Creed confesses,

[I believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds...very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father.

Look again at the words of Ambrose’s wonderful Advent hymn,

Not by human flesh and blood,
By the Spirit of our God,
Was the Word of God made flesh –
Woman’s offspring, pure and fresh {LSB 332:2}.

The other thing that marks Ambrose’s leadership as bishop was that he was not afraid to stand up to the Roman Emperor. Theodosius was the name of the Emperor and in a fit of rage, had about 7,000 people slaughtered in Thessalonica. Ambrose met him at the door of the church in Milan and barred his entrance until he had publicly repented in the manner of King David.

What do we learn from the life and witness of Ambrose? Obviously, the most important thing is not to tolerate doctrinal error. And that can be a difficult thing. It was physically difficult for Ambrose. There were two congregations in Milan, one Arian, one Christian, where Ambrose was pastor. The wife of the emperor was a member of the Arian congregation, so she convinced her husband to send his soldiers to the Christian congregation to close it. They surrounded the church, and Ambrose and

the Christians had to remain inside singing hymns and praying. By the grace of God, the emperor recalled his troops and no one was hurt.

We may not be physical threatened, but preaching the Gospel is difficult. Especially troubling in our day is this lie of the devil that all religions worship the same god and all lead to the same heaven. But, do not fall for it, Dear Saints of God. Jesus is not just another religious leader, He is the Savior of the world, who died the death of every sinner, triumphantly crying in the hour of his death, "It is finished," for His death meant that sin and its cruel wages of death could bind us no more (Jn 19:30). And then, He rose the third day, bringing life and immortality to light. It is this Jesus who says, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn 14:6). It is this Jesus that we teach and confess in the face of all the devil's lies.

And in that, we follow in the footsteps of St. Ambrose. There is a part of Ambrose's life, particularly how he was Christ to his neighbors, that is fascinating. He boldly taught against Arianism, preaching, teaching writing, calling a Council of the Church, even in his hymn writing. Yet, Ambrose did not wash his hands of the Arians and have nothing to do with them. Quite the contrary, they were frequent dinner guests at his home. We do not have transcripts of those dinner conversations, but we could well guess that they talked about the weather, and football, and ... Jesus.

Ambrose stands for us as a reminder that the best way God makes His love know to us is by wrapping it up in a person. That's what He did when He sent His Son as the Babe of Bethlehem. The Word that was with God at the beginning and was God became flesh and dwelt among us.

And, Christ is here today – in you and in me as baptized and redeemed children of God. We make Jesus known by our words, yes; but

also by the way we live among our neighbors. In the footsteps of Ambrose, we remember that the greatest mission field any of us will ever have is our kitchen table.

The Advent season is once again upon us. It's a time to return to the waters of our baptism in daily repentance that we may die to sin and rise to life in Christ, that the Virgin's Son would make His home in us, and we would make Him known to all the world.