

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

The church commemorates St. Ambrose of Milan on December 7. He was a bishop and what is known as a doctor of the church which means his work and writings and have played an important role throughout church history and continue to do so today. For Ambrose, that's something as he was what you might call a "reluctant bishop." Serving as a bishop overseeing a particular area, pastors, and people was not something Ambrose sought for himself.

Ambrose was a well-educated man and had studied a great deal of the Scriptures and theology. One of the pressing issues of the day was Arianism. The Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. had addressed this false teaching which said that Jesus is not of the same substance with the Father and is, in fact, a created being, or there was a time when Jesus was not. The Nicene Creed, which was later added at the First Council of Constantinople in 381 to what you know it as today, is addressed against this heresy. But even out of the Council of Nicaea the language was there especially with the words about Jesus, "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made." It goes on to condemn those who hold to the false view of Jesus, namely the Arians.

In 374, the bishop of Milan, Auxentius, died and a successor was needed. Auxentius, however was an Arian and he held a hatred toward the catholic faith, that is what is taught and confessed by the Scriptures and confessed in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds. Even after the Council of Nicaea, the Arians were still trying to promote their false teachings about Christ and had friends in high places in some parts of the world that allowed them to gain positions of leadership. At this point a well-respected, well-educated, and very well-spoken man had arrived in Milan, having been sent by the emperor, to serve as the consular governor of that region. Ambrose was versed in the law and public discourse along with his theological prowess.

The death of Auxentius brought a great deal of religious upheaval so Ambrose was sent in to try to help keep the peace. The way of electing a bishop was by vote of the assembly. Ambrose went and spoke to the people to try and maintain order. Legend has it that his speech was interrupted by someone yelling out "Ambrose, Bishop!" The rest of the people began shouting his name and he was elected the Bishop of Milan. It's thought that not only was this spontaneous vote, but Ambrose was a logical choice as his training, skill, and eloquence made him the ideal candidate to uphold the true faith as well as be able to speak and try to teach the remaining Arians in the area. Still, Ambrose didn't want to serve in this position and sought to avoid it at own costs even at the expense of his own reputation, but he was known for being very virtuous and a good man. Finally, his resistance was futile, he realized and even though he was raised in the church and was devout, he still had not been baptized. He was then baptized and ordained a bishop December 7, 374 and began to serve.

Throughout his time, he become known for his preaching, teaching, and the worship life of the church. People came from all over to hear his sermons and listen to him teach and defend the faith. He wrote many things pertaining to the Christian life, the duties of the clergy, repentance, taking care of widows, and defending Jesus as the eternal Son of God. His eloquent speech preached the gospel beautifully, for example he once wrote about baptism, "But Christ, beholding His Church, for whom He Himself, as you find in the book of the prophet Zechariah, had put on filthy garments, now clothed in white raiment, seeing, that is, a soul pure and washed in the laver of regeneration, says: 'Behold, thou art fair, My love, behold thou art fair, thy eyes are like a dove's,' in the likeness of which the Holy Spirit descended from heaven. The eyes are beautiful like those of a dove, because in the likeness of a dove the Holy Spirit descended from heaven."

About the Lord's Supper he says in one place, "In that sacrament is Christ, because it is the Body of Christ, it is therefore not bodily food but spiritual. Whence the Apostle says of its type: 'Our fathers ate spiritual food and drank spiritual drink,' for the Body of God is a spiritual body; the Body of Christ is the Body of the Divine Spirit, for the Spirit is Christ, as we read: 'The Spirit before our face is Christ the Lord.' And in the Epistle of Peter we read: 'Christ died for us.' Lastly, that food strengthens our heart, and that drink 'maketh glad the heart of man,' as the prophet has recorded."

His work with hymns and music were also far reaching as he promoted, restored, and refined chanting of the liturgy and various other aspects of the service. He wrote hymns, two of which are in our hymnal, and we are singing today, “O Splendor of God’s Glory Bright,” and what is perhaps his most well-known, “Savior of the Nations Come.”

Two other famous accounts are associated with his life. One involved the Emperor Theodosius I who, after a rebellion by some Thessalonians against the emperor’s officials, massacred many of the people of the city out of vengeance even after Ambrose had urged not to do so. The emperor was called to repentance and when he tried to enter the church where Ambrose served Ambrose stood in front of him and refused him entrance into the door until he publicly repented, to which he later did even to the point of throwing off his imperial robes and weeping on the floor.

The final thing Ambrose is known for is one of his listeners. A well-known public official, who was a pagan had been sent to debate and refute Ambrose as some thought Ambrose had too much sway among the people. This man heard the preaching of Ambrose and God used Ambrose to convert him. Ambrose then baptized this man, and he would then become one of the most well-known writers, theologians, and bishops in church history. His name was Augustine or as you know him, St. Augustine. Ambrose’s work and service were immeasurable, and he died on Good Friday, April 4, 397.

Jesus says in the reading from Matthew today, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”

Jesus is the light of the world, and you are his people. The Christian faith confesses Christ in the world around you. God is glorified as Jesus is faithfully preached, taught, and confessed. As the church you are called to be salt and light. This means that Christ and his word are heard and lived in your lives where God has called you to serve your neighbor. Salt that has lost its saltiness serves no purpose especially as it was used for preservation of food or as a seasoning. To be God’s people is to be people of light who shine that light in the world around you which has been darkened by sin.

The temptation is to let the salt lose its taste in your life or not be that light of Christ. The Gospel reading for this past Sunday had a similar warning when Jesus said in Luke’s Gospel, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away. But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all who dwell on the face of the whole earth. But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.”

Always be looking to Lord who has come, is here now, and is coming again. Be mindful that the days are short, and the Lord will return. Don’t fall prey to the cares of this life to be sure and don’t fall prey to winds of teachings that seek to remove the saltiness of the Christian faith. The devil, the world, and your fallen flesh wants a bland Christianity that doesn’t preserve, doesn’t cleanse, and doesn’t speak forth the truth no matter the cost.

Following in the footsteps of Ambrose you see your life as a hearer of God’s word in this way serving in accord with the Scriptures where God has called you even if that is reluctantly at times. The charge to preachers is what was heard in the second reading. Listen again as God said through the pen of St. Paul, “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.”

Advent 2022 Midweek—St. Ambrose—December 7, 2022

Ambrose is an example of faithfulness even if it means holding an emperor accountable to God. But there's a purpose in that too, it's all for the sake of Christ and his people. God calls you and all people to repentance because God says, "As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live." God doesn't delight in the death of the wicked, the sinner. Sin destroys and condemns. False teaching also destroys and is just as dangerous. Doctrine matters for Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Ambrose fought against Arianism because it created and taught a false god who is not the Savior, Jesus, who is fully God and fully man as the Scriptures reveal him.

Today as the church commemorates Ambrose, give thanks to God for his faithful confession of Christ, the Savior of the Nations who has come. Jesus is the Light of the world. He says in John 8, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life." That's you, dear people of God. You have Christ and you are children of the light. Your sin is forgiven, and you have been called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified as the holy people of God, the church. This is the hope you have and looks forward to the day to come when Jesus comes again in great glory. "O Splendor of God's glory bright, O Thought that bringest light from light, O Light of Light, light's living spring, O Day all days illumining: Alleluia!"

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