

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. [Titus 2:11-13]*

Dear people of God of the Northeastern Ohio Synod and siblings in Christ,

In his book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, author Alan Kreider makes frequent use of the word "habitus." More than mere habit, habitus describes a reflexive bodily behavior that is ingrained in us, an acquired skill or disposition acquired through imitation and training. The book of Acts gives us glimpses into the habitus of the early Christians, but Kreider's historical study shines a broader light into how the church grew despite persecution and numerous other challenges.

Patience was the essential element of growth. As these early Christians reflected on prayer, catechesis (instruction), and worship, they became the embodiment of the gospel. Their primary objective was not to evangelize others; however, others were attracted to them because they saw something different in these Christians' manner of living. Their life was their witness.

Though not organized at first, over the course of its history, the church has developed rhythms to mark the course of time. We are entering the season of

Advent, in which we prepare for the coming of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Advent also signals the beginning of the church year, an appropriate time to develop new

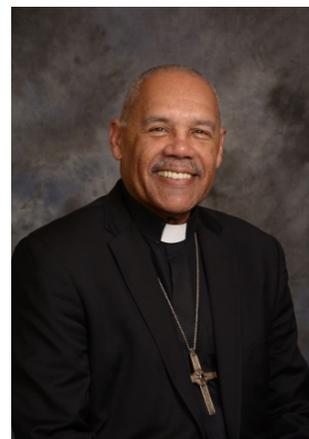
personal patterns in our faith practices or revitalize those that have been set aside or neglected for a while.

The passage from Paul's letter to Titus cited at the top of this page, is one of the lessons we hear read at Christmas Eve.

Unfortunately, it is often overshadowed by the Gospel account of the miraculous birth of Jesus.

As I read the text, I was drawn to the word, "training."

We don't often think of what we do in worship or other church-related activities as training. Yet that is exactly what we are doing. Just as an athlete becomes better at his sport, our life of faith is formed, developed and strengthened through training. Training involves constant repetition. Year after year we rehearse the events in the life of Christ that consequently mold us, discipline and center our lives and the life of the church around the one who has saved us.



The letter tells us that God acted by giving us a gift in Jesus Christ, "bringing salvation to all."

This is the central truth of Christianity. God has entered human history in order to provide for our salvation. What we could not do, God did for us through God's Son. Everything else flows from this truth. If Jesus had not been born, he could not have died for our sins. And he would not have risen from the dead. He had to become like us in order to save us. There was no other way.

The appropriate response to such an act is "to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly." Even if we don't know what it means yet, there is room for God in our lives, and these manners of living are the positive dimensions of God's grace touching our lives.

More than just an event that happened centuries ago, the story of Christ's birth teaches us about opening ourselves up to what God is trying to do in us in this world. Our response is about telling God that we want to be part of what God is doing.

Those who experience God's grace in their lives experience a moral transformation. Such a life manifests the character of God and the nature of the salvation that God accomplishes. That is our witness. Such a life is possible. We have it in our capacity.

Of course, it will always be a work in progress. We will never rid ourselves of quarreling, divisiveness, or judgmental attitudes. We will continue to be abrasive,

impulsive, intolerant, or rude. In short, we will continue to behave in ways that are not reflective of the gospel.

But in the midst of the mayhem and the brokenness of the world we live in, God's grace in our lives helps keep us fixed on "the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ."

It is a journey which, for some of us, begins with the First Sunday of Advent, and keeps us travelling on the path toward that day when we join that great company of heaven. In the meantime, confident of God's love and sure of God's promises, we encourage and challenge each other to renounce the impiety and worldly passions of the present age. We pray, we worship, we witness, and we wait.

With all God's wishes for a Blessed Advent and Christmas,



+Bishop Abraham D. Allende