

Third Sunday of Advent

Sermon Text: Philippians 4:4-7

Theme: “*Rejoice! The Lord is at hand!*”

Grace, peace and mercy to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

The day is getting closer all the time. Can you feel the excitement building? Children are becoming more excited as Christmas Day approaches and as they count down how many more sleeps to go. But just as it is a time of growing excitement for many, for others it may be a time of dread. People without families can look forward to another lonely Christmas. Parents who are unemployed may struggle to buy a gift for their children or for each other. Others who have lost a loved one are spending their first Christmas without the whole family together. So just what is there to be excited about?

Well even in this season when it is easy to become distracted or disappointed, our Heavenly Father give us *the* reason to rejoice. Whether we find ourselves in poverty or wealth, solid families or broken ones, for us as Christians, the reason for our rejoicing is not to be found in our circumstances. Instead it is found in the gracious heart of God who sent his Son to live, suffer, and die for us so we might receive the gift of eternal life and reconciliation with our God.

Heavenly Father, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.

Finding our own reason to rejoice

In the midst of all the Christmas advertising and brochures that are filling our letterboxes, you could be mistaken for thinking true happiness can be found through the purchasing power of the credit card. Maybe it is just me, but each year we seem to be under more pressure to buy up big for the thrill now – worry about the cost later. The TV seems to continually offer up interest free loans and temptations to spend more than you can really afford with offers that seem too good to be true. Is it any wonder that people buy into the lie that joy and happiness can be found in the things of this world.

Ever since Adam and Eve bought into the lie that they could find true joy apart from God, humanity has sought to find security in this world. The great temptation to Adam and Eve was that God was somehow holding out on them. If only they would take a little bite of the forbidden fruit, they would know what they were really missing out on. This temptation continues today. We are constantly being lured to purchase new things that promise to make our lives easier or better and more secure. If we are not alert to the temptations, we may be deceived into believing that created things hold more promise than the Creator.

Now it is not my intention to be a killjoy here. I like gadgets and I like giving to those I care about as much as anyone else. I buy things with the expectation that they will do what it is that I want in order to make my life easier, more productive or more enjoyable. But we should never accumulate ‘stuff’ for its own sake and for those items that do live up to the expectations, we should never forget that they belong here in this world and are unlikely to mean *anything* when we see God face to face.

You only have to look at the litany of rich and famous people who seem to have it all and yet are they really happy. Tiger Woods is the number one headline in the media today and there can be no question as to how much money or how many possessions he has access to. With a fortune estimated at around one billion dollars, there is nothing he couldn’t buy for his family this Christmas – except happiness. I don’t know, nor does anyone except Tiger and his family know what has really gone on and for us it really doesn’t matter but for the lesson it teaches us. It is not possessions that make us happy. Things will never endure, but the relationships we forge are those that will always endure in some form or another. Build strong relationships – with God and with one another, especially those who are closest to you. Jesus put things into an eternal perspective for us: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?” (Mt 16:26) I do pray that Tiger and his family may find the happiness, trust and love of being bound together once more.

Sometimes the rich person seems to be the easy target. They seem to have it all, then they blow it through bad decisions. But what about the person who lives in poverty and is angry at God, at the system, at other people because of the things they seem to lack. Sometimes when we don’t have as much as others, we can think that any lack of happiness and opportunity would be solved if only we had as much as other people. This is really the same problem but in reverse. Money and possessions are still the focus and the objective.

Whether we have too many possessions for our own good or whether we have too few, money and things will never be the source of true happiness and joy. The devil continues to tempt us with false promises of happiness but as long as we cling to the things of this world, we will be separated from God, the true joy-giver.

Rejoice in the Lord - always

St Paul's writing in his letter to the Philippians points us firmly back to Jesus as the reason for real rejoicing. Paul wrote this letter from prison, yet he still calls us to rejoice always, no matter what the personal circumstances are that we find ourselves in at any given point in time. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." It is Jesus who has conquered sin and death for us. All that robs us of hope and joy has been defeated at the cross through the suffering and death of Christ on our behalf. Since the sin that separated us from God has been removed by Jesus' cross, we are now back together with him and we are truly 'in the Lord'.

As his adopted children, we are his no matter what our condition or station in life. We may be blessed to have many things or perhaps we are not so fortunate. What is given freely to all people is a relationship with God that is based on grace. This grace gives us a new sense of purpose in life, a reason to serve with joy and we may rejoice to know our Heavenly Father smiles on our service to others.

Unlike the things we might buy with money, Paul reminds us that "the Lord is at hand" (v5). This means we don't have to be anxious about anything. No matter what our circumstances may be or what twists and turns our lives may take, if we keep our eyes focussed on Jesus, we can be confident that he is the one who is leading us. Instead of moaning about what is going on in your lives, you are encouraged to pray with thanksgiving, letting your requests be made known to God (v6). Here Paul gives good guidance for prayer. Don't let your prayers be a last gasp plea to God when everything has failed. Instead make your prayers a first fruits offering that acknowledges God has his hand on all things and that he will lead you on the right path no matter how things may look. We are called to pray with thanks, trusting and assuming that God already knows what we need, even before we ask him.

Here in faith, in the trust we place in God, we find the peace that passes all understanding. It is the peace that guards your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (v7). This is the peace that is based not on having good things but that is based on the fact that God has reconciled us to himself through his Son. It is a peace that endures and it is a peace that guards and sustains us in our reason for rejoicing.

No matter what circumstance or season we find ourselves in, God gives us a reason to rejoice. He is ever at hand to forgive, sustain, and support us. With the assurance of his love and presence in Christ Jesus, we can place all that we are and all that we have in his hands for time and eternity and rejoice in his grace and mercy toward us. Thanks be to God!

And the peace of God that passes all understanding, keep guard over your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.