

December 12, 2021 - 3rd Sunday of Advent - Sermon

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Healing

The season of Advent is a bit strange in our modern society but I continue to appreciate its focus. Reflecting on themes different from the close arrival of Santa Claus is helpful to me in these days when there are many other factors to deal with. Recently I presided at some funerals which were not terribly unexpected but have still left families with grief over the death of a loved one and who are facing the first Christmas celebration without that loved one. Thoughts of joyous celebrations are not what immediately comes to mind for those households. The people of parts of British Columbia are also facing the Christmas celebrations with mixed feelings as are all those thousands of people who have been affected by the Covid-19 virus in devastating ways. These events, while unpleasant to think about, help me to understand a little more the depths of despair that might have been felt by the people of Israel during the times when these passages of scripture were written. Zephaniah, for instance, was called upon by God to announce some pretty harsh things to the rulers in Jerusalem. Isaiah was called upon to warn of impending doom and John the Baptizer called upon people to repent. The life situations into which these words were spoken were difficult and yet the words hint at a joyous outcome. Zephaniah predicts renewed health and prosperity for the city of Jerusalem and Isaiah does the same. John calls on people to repent become someone more powerful than he is coming and this Messiah will bring about peoples' salvation. In the midst of despair God sends messengers with a ray of hope and, through his servant Paul, encourages his people to 'rejoice in the Lord always'. This is one of the reasons I appreciate the season of Advent. It does not pretend there are no problems but the message of the season points to restoration and healing for the world. What are we to do with that message?

As I thought about the readings assigned for this week I seem to have been drawn to the passage from Philippians. Community unity is one of the over-arching themes throughout the letter, possibly because it was lacking in certain aspects of the community's life. The verses assigned for this Sunday, for instance, are preceded by an appeal from the Apostle Paul regarding two women in the congregation at Philippi. Euodia and Syntyche were presumably friends prior to a dispute because Paul is urging them to reconcile. I think that one of the reasons for the appeal is that disputes have a way of harming the fellowship of believers - even those not directly involved. God's healing is not just referring to an individual's health but the health of the community as well. Immediately following his exhortation Paul inserts his call to 'rejoice in the Lord always'. I have come to believe that this was, in part, a way to counsel the two women to come together once again. I think this because whenever I've been in

disagreement with someone I find that focusing on the imperfections of the other person gets me nowhere but focusing on the wonders of God and rejoicing that I am an adopted member of Christ's flock changes my perspective. If I am to follow the instruction to not be anxious about anything (verse 6) I find it necessary to focus on God rather than on my circumstances. I give thanks to God for this bit of wisdom which St. Paul was inspired to write - partly because of a dispute between two friends. It helps me to see some ways of managing to 'rejoice in the Lord always' when I don't really feel like rejoicing.

In his book "Mere Christianity" C.S.Lewis describes the process of following God as one involving some healthy pretending. What he means by this is the practice of behaving in a way that we don't feel, particularly when it comes to obeying an instruction from God. He reminds his readers that in the case of following God's plan we are not journeying alone but in the company of God through the Holy Spirit. It is that Spirit of God who 'teaches us to obey all that Jesus commands and reminds us of that life'. The Holy Spirit is the conduit for the life of God in us, you might say. So when we 'pretend' by simply obeying God's commands when we don't feel like it the Holy Spirit brings that pretense to life and we become that which we were 'pretending' to be. If I don't feel like rejoicing but I manage to do so in a limited capacity God's Spirit begins to bring that joy into my reality. Now sometimes that work has to be done through some difficulty and so I may not immediately experience the joy I'm trying to express but the testimony of many members of Christ's mystical body declares this practice to be very effective.

At the end of the short paragraph about which I am speaking St. Paul makes a promise to those who follow through with this actions. "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" There is a way in which God allows us to participate in His peace and part of that is to "Rejoice in the Lord always - to not worry about anything but to make our requests known to God with thanksgiving". This is not always easy for us to do but as we practice it the Holy Spirit will gradually make it part of our lives instead of pretending and through that the peace of God will rule.

During this time we are being forced to remain apart from one another so the sense of community has been damaged. Disputes may have been allowed to fester alongside the added tensions brought about by the various restrictions. God's community - the family he has brought together - is designed to be a source of strength and support and that needs to be protected and defended against harm. This season of Advent not only calls us to focus on the birth of Christ and the coming of the Kingdom of God it calls us to 'Rejoice in the Lord always'. We are asked to consider how we have erred and strayed like

lost sheep when it comes to our personal relationships and do what we can to restore the harmony among us. In this way God's light in the world will shine more brightly from our particular gathering places and the effectiveness of our proclamation will go forward even more strongly.