

"Rejoice, Pray, and Be At Peace"
Philippians 4:4-7

December 13, 2015

3rd Sunday of Advent

The Christmas season is an odd season. It is a season where we are told to be happy (or "merry") more than any other time of the year. Yet, at the same time, it is a season where more people are unhappy (unmerry?) than any other time of the year. Why is that so? And is there a solution?

First of all, we have to admit that many people are truly happy at this time of year. It is disingenuous for Christians to act as if having a Merry Christmas is sinful or that unbelievers can't feel happiness apart from Jesus. People can be very happy because of delicious Christmas food – cookies, candy, egg nog, and so on. People can be very happy with the gifts they receive at Christmas. People can be very happy because of the loving family who surrounds them.

But, secondly, we have to admit that many people are very sad and lack joy at this time of year. It is equally disingenuous for Christians to act as if everyone is happy at Christmas time or can be made to be happy by wishing them "Merry Christmas!" enough. Some people lack the basic food they need, not to mention the many holiday treats that come with the season. Some people will receive no presents at Christmas, either because they can't afford them or because they have no one to receive them from. Some people will have no family with whom to share the holiday or, perhaps worse yet, they have a dysfunctional family where fighting and heartache only increase at Christmas. Christmas can be a sad and somber time in our world.

Advent, the time the Church sets aside to prepare for our Lord's coming, can also be a sad and somber time as well. First, we talk a lot about sin and repentance. That can make us feel bad or guilty if we take sin seriously. It is sad to think that the only reason Jesus was born a baby in Bethlehem was because of our sin. We have fallen short of God's requirements by doing many things He forbids and failing to do much of the good He commands. The Son of God broke into time and space as a baby to fix this broken situation. It is a somber experience to think that Jesus hung on a cross, not because He had done anything wrong to deserve such a cruel and painful death, but

because WE deserved it. He dies on the cross as the punishment for your sins and mine. The saddest part of all is our frequent refusal to repent of our sin, preferring to ignore sin in our lives or willfully continue in it.

Second, Advent can be a sad and somber time because of its other main theme: the return of Jesus Christ in judgment. It's a frightening prospect to stand before the judgment seat of Christ with the possibility of being condemned to eternal punishment in hell. Many people, therefore, simply refuse to believe in the existence of hell. Some Christians function as if they don't believe in hell or, if they do believe in hell, they refuse to believe anyone could actually be sent there. However, refusing to believe in something doesn't mean it doesn't exist. Jesus WILL come to judge the living and the dead and many will end up in hell.

The Church recognized that Advent could be quite a heavy season with such themes as sin, repentance, and judgment. The Church also recognized that, in the midst of talking about sin, repentance, and judgment, there was still room for joy. Therefore, the third week of Advent has always emphasized joy and was intended to reflect a lighter mood. The third rose colored candle in the Advent wreath was to symbolize this lighter, more joyful mood.

If we rush past Advent just to get to Christmas, we might miss out on this distinction. However, if we truly recognize the Advent themes of sin, repentance, and judgment while reflecting on the seriousness of our sin, the weakness of our repentance, and our impending judgment, where is there possibly any room for joy?

First, there is great joy that, despite all of the sin we have committed, all of our sin has been forgiven by God. This is not because we have somehow done enough good to make up for our sin. That could never be. Since God's Law requires perfect obedience on our part, even one sin in an entire lifetime makes it impossible for us to do enough good to overcome sin. And Lord knows we have more than one sin to deal with. When Jesus told the parable of the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18, the amount of money the servant owed the king was ten thousand talents. This represents the debt of sin each of us owes to God which, in modern day terminology, would equal

somewhere around \$10,000,000. Imagine trying to pay off a debt that size! Each of us has easily more than ten million sins to our credit (or shame), each of which could damn us to hell. You have a better chance of paying off a debt of \$10,000,000 than paying off your debt of sin to God.

Yet God (like the king in the parable), in His mercy, has cancelled our debt by transferring it to Someone else: His only Son, Jesus Christ. When the Baby of Bethlehem, whose birth we are preparing to celebrate, grew up, He took upon Himself my ten million plus sins and each of your ten million plus sins and the sins of everyone who has lived, is living, and ever will live upon Himself on the cross. There, He endured every last bit of the wrath of God against those sins and every bit of punishment, both temporal and eternal, for those sins. His cry of, "It is finished!", literally means the debt of sin has been paid in full. What joy there is in knowing that! I think that we'd have great joy if someone paid off our VISA bill at this time of year. How much greater joy there is in having every last sin and its consequences paid off for us!

Second, there is great joy that, despite the fact that we deserve to be judged "guilty" and condemned for our sin, we have already been judged "not guilty" and already set free. The thought of judgment frightens people. Even some Christians who firmly believe in the full and complete forgiveness for all of their sins for the sake of Jesus get a little nervous about Jesus returning in judgment and fear that.

But there is no reason to fear judgment at all because it has already been rendered. The Scriptures say, "Whoever believes in [Jesus] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God." (John 3:18) Jesus Himself says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." (John 5:24)

In Holy Baptism, we are joined to Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection. We have already been condemned with Jesus, died with Jesus, and have risen with Jesus to a new life which eternal and which is already ours. We shall not come into judgment on the Last Day, but only experience a public declaration of a judgment that has already been made. We shall pass from death to life.

Therefore, Paul encourages us all to “Rejoice in the Lord always.” And to make sure we got it, He says, “Again I will say, Rejoice.” We rejoice, not only on this day in Advent set aside for rejoicing, but every day. We don’t rejoice because we have everything we want or because everything goes the way we want it to go. If those were our reasons for rejoicing, we might often have no reason to rejoice. But we are to rejoice *in the Lord*. We rejoice in connection with Him and what He has done for us, to us, and in us. His mercy, His forgiveness, His presence, His life, and His promises are always available to us and always worthy of being rejoiced over by us.

When things are not going well, Paul encourages us to “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” The word for “reasonableness” refers to “a humble, patient steadfastness, which is able to submit to injustice, disgrace and maltreatment without hatred and malice, trusting in God in spite of all of it.” (Rienecker/Rogers, p.560) There is no need to get upset and bent out of shape because things are not going well for us. “The Lord is at hand”, Paul says. All of the injustices, disgraces, and maltreatment will soon be resolved in our favor.

Does that mean that we are simply to suck it up, sit back, and take it? Not at all. Our Lord invites and desires us to make known our wants and needs to Him. Paul says, “Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Speak your mind to your Heavenly Father. Ask for whatever you desire Him to give you. Thank Him for whatever He has already given you.

When we rejoice IN THE LORD always – in what He has done, is doing, and will do; when we exhibit a humble, patient steadfastness; and when we pray with thanksgiving and make our requests known to God, then we will be at peace. It is not a personal inner peace that makes sense due to favorable circumstances. It is the peace of God which He gives and not a peace we develop on our own. We are at peace with God for the sake of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus for us. It is a peace which defies understanding because it does not depend upon favorable conditions but exists especially during unfavorable unconditions. It is a peace that will do much more than simply make us feel good inside. It will guard our hearts and minds like a soldier on guard duty guarding the

city gate. That peace will protect our faith, our knowledge, and our desires from all things harmful to them.

While there are legitimate reasons for sorrowing over sin and fearing God's wrath as Luther says in His explanation to the Close of the Commandments in the Catechism, there is always a reason to rejoice now and be at peace in the future. The reason is not the hyped, man-made, commercialized happiness which the world tries to sell us or the warm fuzzy feeling of peace associated with the season. That reason is the Lord Jesus and all that He has done for us in the past, is doing for us now, and will do for us in the future. Our past has been forgiven. Our present is being taken care of. Our future has been secured. So, in our time of Advent waiting, rejoice, pray, and be at peace. Amen.