

December 16, 2012

**The Third Sunday in Advent**

Philippians 4:4-7

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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In preparing for this morning's sermon, I read more than one commentary that warned me, the preacher, against preaching this morning's selection from Philippians *alone*, without putting it in its context. The context about which these commentators are talking is found mostly in the verses right before this one: they warn the reader against those whose "end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things." By contrast, Paul tells us, we who work hard, who suffer for our reward and turn our attention away from earthly matters will be citizens of heaven.

I am told that to preach today's lection without the foundation of the previous one I've described, is "pie in the sky" and foundationless. I must preach the challenge first, I must first encourage you to work for goodness before I can preach the words of comfort, the dessert after the vegetables.

This appeals to me on one level. That's the kind of parent I am. Earn your stickers for your chores, special treats for a job well done. That I need to prep you first with the difficult tasks at hand, with the pitfalls that might sidetrack us, before I can offer you the assurance of God's love, this appeals to that part of me.

But I'm that other kind of parent, too. The kind that knows that sometimes, we just need ice cream in the middle of the afternoon. Every so often, an extra story before bedtime is good for the soul and that a Hershey's Kiss in the lunchbox now and then never hurt anyone.

So I'm going to give you an Advent gift. Philippians 4.4-7 alone. The sweet soft center without the hard shell. No work to get there, just this message. It is short, so I'm going to read it for you again.

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Let your gentleness be known.

Do not worry.

The peace of God will guard you.

Advent is one of two self-examination seasons, Lent being the other. In Lent, we are doing some deep work, looking at the ways we have fallen short in order to prepare for the forgiveness that comes with the resurrection. In Advent, we are clearing a path for the coming of Christ, both in the story of the birth, but also in the Second Coming. We are looking at our lives and sorting through what can stay and what needs to go. We are heeding the urge to “make way!” It is good and holy work we are called into, this spiritual decluttering.

For me, this year, some of the decluttering I’ve been doing involves those voices that get in the way of my thriving. I’m trying to sort through all those messages I get that tell me I’m anything other than a beloved child, forgiven, loved and free. This reading from Philippians draws me into that place of thriving, reminding me where to focus my attention. I invite you into that kind of self examination in this last week of advent. You are beloved. Know that.

But there is another reason I’m giving you the gift of this hopeful message this morning without the difficult challenge that should precede it: because in light of the events of Friday morning, I could use some gentleness, and I figure you probably could too.

I have all kinds of opinions about gun control, school safety and people who prey on the innocent. I have lots of responses to the political and religious talking heads who, in less than 12 hours tried to make this into a platform for their own agendas. I have quotes from Thich Nat Hahn and Fred Rogers.

But you don’t need my rash opinions and quotes catty responses right now. You need gentleness, and so do I. We need to find a way to let our gentleness show in a world that clearly doesn’t value it. I can’t think of a place or people in the world who could not benefit from more gentleness. We are all capable of it, we all need it. And today, in scripture, we hear a call for it.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Practice gentleness, practice kindness, practice patience. But also, accept it. When you see gentleness in action, say thank you, say a prayer. The peace of God will always enfold you, but when you recognize it, acknowledge it. Encourage it. Manifest it.

My own kindergartener will remember December 14, 2012, as the day he lost his first tooth. I have no desire or need to ever have him know otherwise. The tooth fairy-- who as it turns out is far more sentimental than she’d like to admit-- was feeling particularly generous that night. The kid, thrilled by the windfall, pulled me aside later and asked conspiratorially if it would be alright to use his tooth money to buy his little sister’s Christmas present. Friends, there is goodness and gentleness left in this broken and bleeding world, thanks be to God.

It is so easy to see the hate and the mean. It is so easy to hear the voices—both inside and outside our heads—telling us that we are small, insignificant, flawed, ugly and useless. We aren’t used to seeing and hearing gentleness and joy. But,

friends, this morning, the Bible tells us so: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Find the gentleness within you and outside you. Nurture it, pass it along. The world needs it as much as you do. Enfold yourself in the peace of God—the peace beyond all understanding—and know yourself beloved.