

### “The Lord is Near”

The Lord is near. John, called John the Baptist, preached that message. In his unique position as forerunner of Jesus, the one who would prepare the hearts of the people for their Savior, John told the people that the Lord was near. He was coming in wrath to punish the wrongdoers. His axe was already at the tree prepared to cut it down if it continued to refuse to produce fruit. But the Lord was also near with his forgiveness and salvation. The one who would separate the wheat and the chaff and cast the waste product into the burning fire was also the one who would gather his grain into his barns. John preached that he was not the Christ, but that the Christ would soon be made known. The Lord was near.

The Lord is near. That's the message of our Advent season. We've now lit three Advent candles on our wreath, and we can see in that visual aid that Christmas is coming closer and closer. Our celebration is near. But that's not all that our Advent is about. Our Advent season is also about preparing for the judgment about which John spoke. The Lord is near. Jesus will soon be returning to do the work of gathering his people into the eternal dwelling of heaven and completing the destruction of his foes in the fires of hell. And so the message cuts both ways. The Lord is near, and that terrifies sinners. It causes us to look at our lives and to admit our deep and dreadful need for repentance and for forgiveness. The Lord is near, and that brings us joy, because it is the Lord who brings forgiveness and leads us to repentance.

The third Sunday of Advent has long been recognized as a day of rejoicing. It's not the festival celebration of Christmas, but it is a day that realizes that Christmas is coming close. And so, even in the midst of a call to repentance, and a warning about the impending judgment, today God's Word tells us to rejoice. We heard about rejoicing in our Scripture lessons today. The Old Testament people of Judah rejoiced and celebrated their festivals. The people who heard and responded to John's message did as he instructed. Their changed hearts, full of joy, led them to produce repentance-filled fruits of faith.

And this morning we rejoice as we turn our attention to that same message: the Lord is near. After the earthly ministry of Jesus was complete, after his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead, his apostle preached the message that his prophets had beforehand: the Lord is near. He preached it to the Philippian Christian so long ago, and he preaches it to us today.

Paul says: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”** As we sit here so many years later, it is a little difficult for us to appreciate how amazing and surprising these words are. Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians from his prison in Rome. It wouldn't seem like a time filled with rejoicing, but for Paul any time was a time for rejoicing. And that was the message that ran throughout his letter to his dear friends, a message that is at a high point in these few verses.

Paul does not say, “Don't worry, be happy.” He doesn't say, “Everything is going to be alright.” He doesn't throw out any other empty platitudes or hollow clichés. Paul's point isn't that Christians need to be happy about everything all the time. Paul is talking about a much deeper and more real joy. He says “Rejoice in the Lord.” And it is only in the Lord that any of us have a real reason to rejoice.

Rejoicing in the Lord comes from believing that he has saved us from our sins. It comes from understanding that our own deeds were never and will never be good enough, so God stepped in to take our sinful actions away and to give us credit for the perfect actions of Jesus. We could consider all sorts of examples to illustrate this point, but let's simply look at the one Paul offers when he encourages, “Let your gentleness be evident to all.” The word “gentleness” is an attempt to translate a Greek word that doesn't come into English very easily. In Greek it has to do with being considerate and gracious, even

when in a position of power. It talks about a willing spirit of humility that doesn't try to assert one's own rights, but instead concentrates on the needs of others.

That sort of behavior goes completely against our sinful natures. It doesn't come naturally to us, even though it is God's expectation. And so, for every time that we've failed to exercise that sort of gentleness, God has every right to condemn us. But instead he sent his Son to be not only an example of gentleness, but also the Savior of a world of selfish sinners who wanted nothing to do with it. Rejoicing in the Lord means responding to his love by displaying that sort of gentleness that he asks of us. It means letting fruits of repentance grow in our lives.

The Lord is near. It is a scary thought to those who still live in their sins, or at least it should be. But to us it is reason to rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord. He is coming again to bring us to be with him forever. No earthly hardship or challenge, no sad event, no suffering can take away our joy in the Lord.

And while we wait for Jesus to come again, we will pray. Instead of being anxious about what is coming, instead of being apprehensive about our futures, instead of being worried about what is going to happen to us, God invites us to cast our cares on him. He asks us to offer our prayers and requests to him. As Paul writes, **"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."**

Anything. Everything. There is nothing too big that we can't bring it to God in prayer. He can handle it all. And there is nothing too small that we can't bring it to God in prayer. He cares enough about us to answer it. We can and we should ask for what we want and for what we need. And we can do it with thanksgiving. We are thankful knowing how many of our wants God has already lavished on us and how many of our needs God graciously has provided for us. And he continues to do so, day after day.

God's chosen writer wraps up all these encouragements with a promise for God's people to trust: **"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** Just like true rejoicing, true peace goes much deeper than what people generally recognize. The peace of God is much greater than peace on earth or any political peace that we might consider. The peace of God is the assurance that since our sins are forgiven, God is not our enemy but our loving Father. And it is so much more than a feeling. Indeed, it is something that even our reason and understanding cannot comprehend.

The peace of God guards our hearts and minds like a soldier standing guard against any attack. It wards off doubts and fears. It pushes back against false teaching and false hope. The peace of God drives away anything that would threaten our faith in God and our love for others. The peace of God is the gospel-driven connection to Jesus Christ that we enjoy as God's children.

The peace of God gave the Old Testament believers a reason to celebrate their festivals. It gave the followers of John the Baptist a reason to amend their lives with repentant fruits. The peace of God gave the Apostle Paul the assurance with which he could write, even from prison, a most encouraging and joyful letter. And that same peace of God prepares us to celebrate the holiday of our Savior's birth. It guards our hearts from distractions. It overcomes sorrows. It overwhelms doubt. It looks with certainty to the day that Christ will return, the day of our salvation.

That day is near. Our Lord is near. The day is nearer now than when these words were written in all their urgency. I can't tell you how many people have shared with me thoughts so similar to mine in recent weeks: "How can it be so close to Christmas already? Time just seems to be flying by!" Indeed, our earthly lives do fly by. At the time of our deaths or at the time of our Lord's return, we will realize how brief these moments have been compared to the eternal glory that awaits us. But for now, we are content to know that the Lord is near. And because he is, we will rejoice, pray, and trust. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The Text: Philippians 4:4-7 (NIV84)

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.