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## *Sermon*

The Rev. Buddy Crawford  
The Cathedral of St. Philip  
Atlanta, Georgia  
13 December, 2009  
Advent III, Year C  
7:45 & 9:00 Liturgies

Among the fond memories of my childhood parish are my duties as an acolyte. In the time before the convenient combination cassock-albs we wear today, acolytes assisted our priest in the vesting room - there were layers of clothing, a black cassock covered with a white alb, an amice was tied to form a collar, then a cincture and a stole, and finally a chasuble. I remember vividly the chasuble for Advent III - it was rose colored. The Chasuble had been made for someone my height and barely came down to the upper thighs of Father Gilmore, who was 6'4" tall and skinny as a rail. Father made a very humorous sight - this big man in his pink, dusty rose garb. The vesting room filled with joyous laughter as the acolytes, boys and girls, taunted him with good natured ribbing, and he took it all in stride, laughing with us at himself, because he loved us and we loved him.

Remember when purple and pink were the liturgical colors for Advent instead of the blue you see today? While I have adjusted to the use of blue, I miss the lighting of the odd pink candle, the visual reminder that our annual pilgrimage to Bethlehem - with its waiting, expectation, hope, and anticipation - is halfway over. Whatever color the candles are, the third Sunday of Advent is here, and it is a day characterized by rejoicing.

And we have much to rejoice in. Soon we will arrive in Bethlehem, Mary is "great with child," in a few days we will hear in our spirits and imaginations the sound of a baby's cry. However, though today is joy-filled in our anticipation, we have not arrived yet. There is still work to do. We heard a moment ago one of the most encouraging passages in Paul's letters, but it also contains a word of challenge as we continue preparing for Jesus' arrival.

Writing from a prison cell Paul exhorts the Philippians to, "Rejoice in the Lord always." Undistracted by his present circumstances, Paul sends a message to his beloved community at Philippi. A community that is generous in supporting his mission among the gentiles. But now Paul receives word that opponents have arrived preaching a different Gospel from the one he delivered. Besides this there is dissension within the community, factions are forming, breaking down the loving relationships among the members of the church. Distressed from within and without they are in desperate need of encouragement and guidance and Paul's advice is - Rejoice!

Rejoicing, for Paul, means more than joyous laughter and happiness, it is an act of the will, a choice based not on emotions, but grounded in the relationship each person has with the Lord. In light of their circumstances Paul's advice may have sounded shocking. Rejoice - does he know what is happening here? He does and his life is a witness that in every situation, good or bad, we may rejoice in the good news that God loves. In Love, God comes to us in the flesh, enters the pain of our existence, and gives us new life and hope for a transformed world. Paul rejoices while incarcerated because the gospel is being proclaimed and is being made incarnate in the lives of men and women like you and me.

Pairing rejoicing with prayer, Paul urges the Philippians "in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, to let your requests", your needs, stresses, failures, disappointments, worries and even joys, let them all, be made known to God. Like rejoicing, prayer also is grounded in relationship - it is communication between God and his beloved creation. When unemployment is increasing and the stock market is falling, when the healthcare debate seems to be going nowhere and anxiety is rising, we turn to God in prayer to find peace.

Between the advice to rejoice and to pray is a less recognized verse. "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." Gentleness may also be translated, consideration of others, let your consideration of others be known to everyone. This verse parallels John the Baptist's word to those who come asking what they should do. Repent, he says, turn around and consider others. Give away food and clothing, change your behavior and treat others ethically. Find the nearness of the Lord in the other person. Look to the world so that they will be drawn to the gospel, and then we will find the peace of God together.

This third Sunday of Advent we might ask one another, "What must we do to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom?" How are we making room for the Christ child to come among us - what will our lives look like when we arrive at the stable in Bethlehem? Paul and John call us to a costly and particular way of living and being, it is a way counter-intuitive to that of the world. Rejoice in the good and the bad, treat others as you want to be treated, take care of the "other" who appears in your community, give and do not hoard and the result is peace beyond human understanding.

When we embrace the lessons we hear today, I believe we will finish our pilgrimage in Bethlehem, we will kneel at the crèche and welcome God who deigns to come to us in flesh and blood, God who comes to us in the stresses and strains we face each day. When we live joy-filled lives that are immersed in prayer and give consideration to others, our lives will be used for the transformation of the world as we reflect the glory of God in Christ Jesus.

Let us sincerely pray that the Lord will stir up his power and with great might come among us, so that our lives will be true and honorable, that we will live with justice and purity of thought, and that we will become pleasing and commendable to the Lord at His coming. Amen.

Comments? Contact The Rev. Buddy Crawford at: [bcrawford@stphilipscathedral.org](mailto:bcrawford@stphilipscathedral.org).