

**3 Advent, Year C – *The Peace of God which Surpasses All Understanding*  
Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18; Canticle 9  
The Rev. Skip Bushee**

Perhaps many of you have noticed that our Advent Wreath has three violet candles and one that is rose colored. No, it is not because the store ran out of violet candles or that members of our altar guild suffer from color blindness. Rather, it is because this Sunday, the third Sunday in Advent is traditionally known as “Rejoice Sunday.” It is all about celebrating the joy and anticipation of the coming of the Christ child.

I don’t know about you but I am ready for Rejoice Sunday. Our lessons for the past few Sundays have been full of dark apocalyptic visions and dire warnings to be prepared for the coming of the Lord lest we be thrown into unquenchable fire. I need some good news.

Also, in our secular lives, we have been engaged in the hustle and bustle of preparing for the holiday season, the buying of presents, the decorating of our homes and the planning for holiday parties. Now we can rejoice that this effort is nearly complete, except, of course, if you are like me, and have put everything off to the last minute.

The theme of rejoicing comes through clearly in our lessons. Writing in the time of the great reformer king Josiah, Zephaniah tells us to, “Rejoice and exult with all your heart... The Lord has taken away judgments against you, he has turned away your enemies.” Our sins have been forgiven and Osama bin Laden has been vanquished. Well maybe half right.

The Canticle we recited is called the First Song of Isaiah and it proclaims that we will, “Draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation,” and we are told to “Ring out your joy for the great one in the midst of you is the Holy One of Israel.” Sounds like the words to a Christmas carol.

But my favorite is this morning’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Philippians, one of the seven Pauline letters that scholars agree was actually written by Paul. Although writing from prison with his future very much in doubt, Paul exhorts us to, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” He tells us not to worry about what calamities may be upon us or about to come our way because “The Lord is near.” His formula for feeling this joy is to let our gentleness be known to everyone, not to worry, and to ask God through prayer for what we need. If you do so you are bound to learn that “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” This beautiful statement, which forms the basis for the priestly blessing we receive at the end of our Eucharist, promises a feeling of peace that we can not understand because it comes despite any troubles or calamities we may be experiencing.

So what is this “Peace of God that surpasses all understanding,” and, more importantly, how can we find it in our own troubled lives?

To understand, we need to examine where St. Paul was coming from. First of all, he was not a well man. He suffered from a debilitating and humiliating physical ailment, possibly epilepsy, which prevented him from doing many things. Deep down, he must have suffered from an overwhelming sense of guilt at having participated in the persecution and murder of so many early Christians, including Stephen. In his travels he constantly suffered humiliation, rejection and even banishment from the places he visited because of his views. He had been jailed seven times, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked and had been without clothes, food, and shelter so many times that he could barely count them. And now, here he was, in prison once more, unable to pursue his dream of pushing his evangelistic mission further west to Spain, and cut off from his friends and associates except by letter. Even that luxury may have required bribes and other means to get past the prison guards. Most importantly, his future was very much in doubt; he could have been sentenced to death at any time. He certainly had every reason to despair.

And yet, it is clear from this letter that he felt anything but despair. Instead, he was feeling the “Peace of God that surpasses all understanding.” Given the situation in which he found himself, there was no logical reason to have such feelings – hence it surpassed all understanding. Nevertheless it was there, clearly a gift from God.

As you may know, every Sunday during the administration of communion (at the 10 o’clock service), I serve at the healing bench. Every week, I hear the stories of those among us who are not at peace. Many suffer from debilitating physical ailments that disturb their peace. Others have emotional or financial issues or difficulties with loved ones that try their souls. At this time of year, many of us suffer from loneliness as we remember loved ones no longer with us with whom we can no longer share the joys of Christmas. All of these stories break my heart, often to the point of tears. There are so many in our congregation who suffer greatly, perhaps not in the same way Paul suffered but I imagine the suffering is no less intense.

Paradoxically, though I may approach the healing bench each week with some trepidation, I never leave without a renewed feeling of peace myself. It is a peace that certainly surpasses all understanding, considering the sadness and anguish that is presented there. It makes no sense but it is there nonetheless. I believe that the simple act of sincerely praying for God’s peace and wishing that peace on another person somehow brings a little bit of that peace on me as well. I don’t know why that is, but as Paul said, it surpasses all understanding anyway.

So here’s my thought: beginning with this Advent season, let us seek a bit more of God’s peace in our own lives by taking the time to bring it to others. Practice right here in a few minutes as we pass God’s peace to each other. Take an extra moment with each person to gaze into their eyes and open yourself to God’s presence. See if you can really mean what you say.

Likewise, if you encounter someone who seems in distress, whether a friend or someone you pass on the street as you go about your daily life, take a moment to ask how they are. If they say, “fine,” don’t accept that answer. Ask them again how they really are and take

the time to pay attention, to really listen to the answer. You don't need to try and solve their problems for them. Instead, take their hand and offer a few simple words of encouragement ending by offering God's peace.

It won't always be easy. For many, it will require a real leap of faith to confront someone in this way. You may find some who will reject your kindness or mistrust your motives. But I promise that there will be those who will receive your simple gift with joy. When that happens, you both will find a new and unexpected gift of God's peace and joy in your lives. It is the greatest gift we can offer anyone and the best part is that the more we give, the more we get.