

## THE LORD IS NEAR

Hear the Word for this Fourth Sunday of Advent, as God prepares our hearts, minds, and thoughts for the coming of our Savior:

*The Lord (is) near! Let not all of you continue to be of divided minds, but in all (things), by the prayer and the entreaty with thanksgiving your requests continue to make known to God ...<sup>1</sup>*

**Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ**

The Lord is near. The Lord's return is nearer today, more so than any other day in the history of the world. Throughout the four Sundays of Advent, the coming of the Lord has been foretold. The Christ draws near. Four Sundays now have proclaimed, in this order: Hope through Jesus' coming to die as the world's Savior; Peace in knowing that Jesus the Christ is coming on the Last Day; Joy in hearing true, accurate, historical accounts of Jesus' coming as the Christ; and, today, true Love, as hearers of the Word grasp what God was doing in Jesus' coming to be baptized with the sins of all humans.

The messages of Advent ring strange to people in our world. And, because we are all people in this world, Advent's preparations for the comings of the Christ can sound hollow, and somber, perhaps even lacking in joy at times. Weekly themes call each of us, and all of us, to know our sinfulness and sins, to sorrow over them, to will to turn from them – and to receive the forgiveness Jesus came into our flesh to grant through His perfect life and death in our sins. Why, even the décor of the Church buildings in congregations which are trying to remain faithful to the helpful traditions which reinforce the proclamation of the Advent season are different. That which we see

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<sup>1</sup> *Philippians 4:5b – 6.*

on lawns, in stores, in the electronic media, and, perhaps, even in some of our homes seem more full of light and joy than the colors purple, pink, and the light of a few candles. Yet, through all these differences from the culture around us, God's Word, and the Church's decorations which are given to support its proclamation still cry out clearly:

*All of you rejoice in the Lord always: I will say (it) again, all of you rejoice.<sup>2</sup>*

From St. Paul's letter to the Church at Philippi written long ago, come words of encouragement for a congregation divided. Their assembly had a few problems. There were disagreements among the women of the Church. This was not over decorations in the Nave and Chancel! Why, they wouldn't even know what an Advent wreath or Christmas tree was. Mary and Joseph would look at these and have to be taught their meanings. These images, helpful if their meanings are taught, just weren't part and parcel of their worlds. That congregation also had men who lived in their midst who taught and acted as enemies of the cross of Christ. Our old Advent Frontal (the large cloth that hangs on the Table of the Lord) with the cross rising above the cradle would likely have seemed an abomination to them. They were focused on the things of the world – for them Christ's Advent was a time when it is better to receive than to give! We might express their motivation as “give me the manger, but not the cross!” (Heard a message in a “seeker service” last week that almost got to the Gospel – Jesus came as God to be born in our flesh.... Twice that was declared, but never did we who were left hanging learn why the Christ was born as an infant human – to be our sin-bearer, to die

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<sup>2</sup> *Philippians 4:4.*

in our sins, to bring us forgiveness). Divisions in the early Church were caused by men who wanted to remain under God's Law in order to be saved. There were men in the congregation of Philippi long ago who taught that to be a true, completed Christian, males still needed to be circumcised. There are people today, this Advent, who are hearing of what it takes to be a "good" Christian without hearing of Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of their sins. If you want teaching without the cross, without the reason for the season – Jesus came to die to set you free from sin, death, and hell itself – repent! Turn and believe that is the message of Jesus' comings in the Advent season. Know in the center of your being that Jesus' birth means death to sin for you and His death means eternal life for you! Let that which is in your heart – Christ-crucified – the central message of the Letter to the Philippians, the central message of the Church militant – let that truth dwell in your mind. Stop blocking the Good News of Jesus, the Jesus of the Scriptures. You are free to let that which flows from your heart to your mind guide your thoughts. With Christ as your center, at your top, in your life, you will have His power to fulfill these words no matter what the rest of your life may bring:

*All of you rejoice in the Lord always: I will say (it) again, all of you rejoice.<sup>3</sup>*

God desires that joy will fill the Christian's life as light. That is a meaning you are free to attach to the Advent lights here. Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love shine in our midst, all circling around Christ the Light of Life. Those who hear of their sins, sorrow over them, will to turn from them and hear in believe in Jesus as the Light who drives

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<sup>3</sup> *Philippians 4:4.*

back the darkness of sin in us, in the world, are actually free to follow Him in joy all the way to cross, grave, resurrection, and ascension. Those, you who know that you have been bought with the most precious price – the blood of Jesus – are free then to follow St. Paul’s next God-breathed words:

*Let your[pl] reasonableness in judging be made known to all men: the Lord is near.<sup>4</sup>*

God, through Paul, is speaking to the Church, first in Philippi, and today, here. From the joy that fills us on account of God’s leniency toward us – granting His free grace to sinners while still in their sins – we are free to be gentle, and reasonable toward others, and especially to those who are in the Church. If you have self-righteously held to your concept of the benefit of something in the Church which is neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture, confess your sin, and believe that Jesus died to take all sin from you. In repentance and forgiveness you are free to live the truth that the Lord is near everyday of your life. You see, the Advent of our Lord, while it may be a three-to-four week time of repentance and preparation in the Church year, the Advent of our Lord is a clear and present reality every moment of every Christian’s life. How have you been doing with living every moment as if it was the moment of Christ’s return?

Know that Jesus came to be baptized in your sins so that you can be forgiven for not continually living as if His return is imminent. Believe that His death, which was the reason for His birth, brings you forgiveness. As you keep in those twin realities, God

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<sup>4</sup> *Philippians 4:5.*

is keeping you prepared for Jesus' coming. Then, with the immediacy of His return before you, in you, you are freed to live as St. Paul still encourages the faithful:

*The Lord (is) near! Let not all of you continue to be of divided minds, but in all (things), by the prayer and the entreaty with thanksgiving your requests continue to make known to God ...<sup>5</sup>*

That, dear ones, describes the Christian life. The exhortation begins with a call to each believer to hold fast to the reality which God's Word has implanted in our hearts. That is, Jesus' birth into death into eternal life, that which the Word sows in the center of our beings, which wells up to the center of our minds. In the things of this life, we are free in Christ to, in our eternal joy, cast all our worries, troubles, and conflicts on the Lord.<sup>6</sup> All of the words from the letter to the Philippians which have been read into our ears today describe the temper, quality, and motivation of all true Christian hearts.<sup>7</sup>

In the joy of the Lord, you are free then, to ask God for that which you, the Church, and those who are still lost in the world, truly need. As God's Word centers your mind, it guides your thoughts to ask for that which God wills to grant. You know, as you have heard, that God knows what you need before you ask. What you might have forgotten, is that, when you make your requests known to God, He, through His Word, aligns your thoughts with His. If you ever find yourself wondering if your prayers are asking for the right things, turn to the prayer God gave you. In the Our Father, everything you need for this life into the next is summarized. Your devotion to God – first Table realities – is in that prayer. Your devotion to your neighbor – second

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<sup>5</sup> *Philippians* 4:5b – 6.

Table realities – is in that prayer. As you continue to hear the Word of the Lord, God does, and will, use that Word to frame your requests so that they are in line with His mind! Does this mean that you will always ask perfectly in that which you request of God?

Of course not. But, God has given you His Spirit, who intercedes for you when you fail. He points you to the Son who prays for you, intercedes with the Father on your behalf with perfect words, fully in line with the will of God. God hears your prayers for the sake of Christ, and through His Word, continues to mold you into His image. In Him, you begin to look for His true love, the love of manger, sinless life, and cross. In Him, you are prepared to hear the final words from St. Paul for today, those which conclude the encouragement to prayer and entreaty before the King of Kings and Lord of Lords:

*And the peace of God, which is surpassing all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.<sup>8</sup>*

No, the sermon is not over just yet! Most of you hear words like those here most Sundays and Wednesdays. A few of you wait for them so that you can know that the Lord's service is moving on, that soon you will be freed from this place to do that which you have planned for the rest of the day. Many of you wait to hear the inspired words of peace because you have learned in your hearts, had planted in your minds, and think in your thoughts, that those words do just what they proclaim. Pastors who stand

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. *1 Peter* 5:7.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, R.C.H. *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, (1937, 1946) 1961. 874ff.

<sup>8</sup> *Philippians* 4:7.

here can see that reflected in some of your faces (usually of those of you who are of extroverted personalities)!

Since at least 1931, eighty years ago, congregations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod have heard St. Paul’s inspired words, translated into English, close their pastors’ sermons. They follow the words of the pastor’s letter to God’s people in a particular location, at a specific time in history, just as they did when St. Paul first had them recorded. The words of the blessing are given to convey God’s peace to those who have just heard God’s Law and Gospel, to leave in them His peace. That divine peace exceeds anything which can be worked by humans. God’s peace is proclaimed to work in His people’s hearts, the very center of their beings.

Therefore for our generations, traditional end to evangelical sermons, brings God’s peace to the ear of His hearers. From there it goes to the whole person, at your very core. Then, by the power of the Word of God, it wells up into your mind. From there, God’s declaration of peace guards, as those who once stood at city gates to allow passage from inside to outside the city wall, God’s peace works to form your thoughts, to bring forth things pleasing to Him out into your life, and into the world. The peace of God truly guards that which comes out of your hearts! That being so, please stand and receive God’s Word as His present and eternal blessing.

*And the peace of God, which is surpassing all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.<sup>9</sup>*

Advent IV Rorate Coeli, (LSB One-year series)  
December 18, 2011

Psalm 111; Deuteronomy 18:15-19; Philippians 4:4-7; John 1:19-28  
*Pastor Michael H. Merhouse*

**SOLI DEO GLORIA**

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<sup>9</sup> *Philippians 4:7.*