

THE CALL TO HUMBLE, PATIENT STEADFASTNESS IN THE LOVE OF GOD

Hear the Word of God for this Fourth Sunday celebrating Christ's Advent, with our thoughts centered by the following translated verse:

Do not be anxious; but in all things by the prayers and the petitions with thanksgiving your[pl] requests make known to God.¹

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

The texts for this day serve to bring to completion the weeks of the Church's anticipation in the hope, peace, joy, and love which is ours in the advents of the Lord. In a teaching congregation such as this, it continues to be a true wonder to hear how the Holy Spirit brings forth the fruits of God's Word through the minds, notes, manuscripts and proclamations of the men who are privileged to stand in this pulpit. Their words are reinforced, and at times, corrected, by the words of powerful Advent hymns. The Word builds upon the Word, sermon learns from sermon, and hearers are bonded into one Christ—He whose coming in our flesh to be our Savior will soon be celebrated again.

Through four weeks— with the last usually incomplete— God's people are built by Him into an assembly which is able to rejoice as one. This the Word calls us to do with humble, patient steadfastness in the face of this world's attacks upon the Faith once delivered. One need only turn on electronic media for instant, up-to-date reports of the hostility many hold toward people of the Faith of Jesus. Or, for those who desire to have their shock a bit more muted, one need only look to yesterday's news recorded in print to behold the pressures that continue to come upon those who confess Christ born in our flesh to bear our sins into death that we might be free from them.

Such realities are portrayed and symbolized through the changing colors of the season. Royal purple adorns our chancel once again as the bright rose of joy has been retired for use in another season of repentance. With the shift in color, the people of God are reminded that this is the week to recall the coming of the Greater One, the King who

¹ *Philippians 4:6.*

was born to die to set His people free from our most egregious enemies – sin, death, and the wiles of the devil.

The glimmer of the regal gold of the King of kings whose birth anniversary will be celebrated this week is anticipated as even now, purple again adorns our chancel. We are being held in muted anticipation by the Church's ancient readings, wonderful hymns and the proclamation of the Coming One today for that which the advent of this Thursday night and Friday have been set to bring before us. Yet, with the restraint that comes from living in the Faith, we are held back from the angels' proclamations and the giving of gifts that may recall God's greatest Gift once given. Even so, today's readings remind us, in the Spirit of muted joy, that you all are free in God's Gift of the Christ to:

*Continue to rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, all of you must continue to rejoice!*²

But wait! This week centers upon the proclamation of the Baptizer about the Coming One Who is greater than he. Yet, it begins in our Epistle reading with a call to rejoice. That was last week's theme, was it not? Ah, the wisdom of the Fathers of the Church in selecting such a text for a transition from the week of joy to the week of love. For, though it is not in our bulletins for today, that call to joy, in its setting in Holy Scripture is immediately preceded by an apostolic call to remain steadfast in the Lord. With that in mind, hear again the opening call to the Church this week of preparation to behold the Coming One of God:

*Continue to rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, all of you must continue to rejoice!*³

three local families our carolers just met yesterday, tragedies in their lives this week press in to diminish their joy – the apparently imminent death of a mother; the funeral of a brother; the horrors of ISIS in Iraq to a soldier who lost his best friend in combat to Those words may be a bit difficult to handle for some among us, and those who are our

² *Philippians 4:4.*

³ *Philippians 4:4.*

neighbors in this community this year. For some of us, pressures of finances and Christmas gift-giving expectations mute our rejoicing. For others, the constant media harping on political solutions to the problems caused by Adam's Fall – sin in the world and the devil's temptations are beginning to drown out the proclamations of the season that has not yet begun. In this congregation, the sudden and unexpected falling asleep in the Lord of our sister Debbie Cowles two days ago is a reality which dims our joy. For liberate that country. (We have preached for years that God placed this congregation to shine out His Light from this hill. He continues to send us out to those near us who need His consolation. He gives us His Word – yesterday proclaimed in song – to bring the Hope, Peace, Joy and Love of this season to those who are hurting). Against all the pressures in this fallen creation, and the many more to come, the Word of God calls out to grant us, to proclaim to you, the true hope of this season. That is given to keep us in joyful anticipation that we might hear and live and share in the love of God displayed in the Lord's coming. The Word even makes it clear how simple such lives in love can be:

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

Those words were first proclaimed to the Church when she was about to enter some two hundred years of intense persecution. It is highly likely that some of those first hearers were brought before judges, governors and magistrates. The forces of this fallen world – sinful people and malevolent spirits – worked to try to turn them from the proclamation of Christ-crucified for the forgiveness of sins. Even so, the Word of God encouraged the faithful to declare that eternal truth for even their accusers and executioners.

God's call to reasonableness in judging has helped His people stand the test of time. You see, these words, *Let your[pl] reasonableness in judging be made known to all men: the Lord is near*, have held great meaning for Christians for almost 20 centuries. They, as you today, learn that call means to remain in the Lord, to stand fast in the face of

⁴ *Philippians 4:5.*

injustice, disgrace and maltreatment for the right confession of Christ Jesus. The Word calls us, implores you, to humbleness and steadfastness in the Faith of the Coming One despite the attacks of this fallen world, the deceiver of Man, and your own sinful flesh.

In her sure and firm confession, the Church has grown every generation since the first generation of believers shed their blood into death for and in the Faith. God's Word is declared today to you who may be at the beginning of another couple hundred years of government, social, and cultural pressure to renounce the Faith of Jesus. The Lord is nearer now than when the ancients first believed. He is coming in the flesh which conquered death. That is true even as we are being prepared by readings, proclamation and hymnody to celebrate another anniversary of His first coming in the flesh. Hear God's call as the fallen creation, and sinful creatures press in to try to rob you of the joy that is yours in Christ:

Do not be anxious; but in all things by the prayers and the petitions with thanksgiving your[pl] requests make known to God.⁵

As you remain in Christ, connected by Him into one Body – the Family of Christ in this place, and from here, around the world – you are free to be relaxed under pressure. Nervous anticipation of coming troubles, even when they are at one's doorstep, is not necessary. God has given you, has given us, His means which are able to take away our human anxieties. You just heard Him say, *in all things*, call out to Him. He reminds you how He hears all of you in times of joy and times of distress – *by the prayers and the petitions*.

Those are two very specific terms in the biblical languages. The first, *the prayers*, is used in Scripture to indicate the “set prayers” of the Church. In those, the Word includes the recitation of the Psalms. That is one reason why for years, to get us accustomed to praying the Psalms, they were the opening propers (the changeable readings) for each week. Now, we offer *the prayers* beginning with the Introit Psalm verse

⁵ *Philippians* 4:6.

and antiphon. We do so week in and week out, whether it has been a week of joy or a week of sorrow.

From that, we are called as one to offer *the petitions*. These in Scripture, are specific requests. They are framed from the needs of individuals, the Church, the government, the world. They may be written and recited – for the Holy Spirit does work through preparation through the Word of God. They may be freely prayed in the midst of the Christian community from life realities and concerns which may arise from time to time. Above all, from the text itself, they are the responsibility and privilege of the Christian Family, joined to her Head Jesus, to offer to God. In what manner?

The Holy Spirit declares, *with thanksgiving the requests of all of you make known to God*. You will note that the call to watching, preparing, rejoicing and beholding that the Lord is near is to all of you as one. That is most clearly done in thanksgiving in the corporate offering of the prayers in the Lord's Services. Here, we actually care enough to honor the dozens of people who wish to have their loved ones, friend and people they can't stand named before the Lord, week in and week out. We even give time, hopefully with a long enough pause in the midst of our prayers, for you to silently add your specific requests with thanksgiving as you stand one with all of us.

If you have struggled against such specific requests, stop doing so! If you have desired that we rush through the sacrifice of prayer, repent! Such petitions are not offered for show, but for thanksgiving to God for all that He continues to do for us poor sinners, and for those who do not yet know Him. Turn from such self-centered thinking. The prayers of the Church are our response to God's command as you are hearing it today. Christ prayed for His enemies, even for those who would stop His prayers to the Father. You are attached to Jesus. He came into this world to die to make that so. If you want to remind yourself of how much time Jesus spent in just one prayer, review that which was preached only in part this past Wednesday: the High Priestly Prayer. You are free to recall that Jesus even now prays to the Father for you. He intercedes when you fall short of words. His Spirit takes up the prayers, and they rise before the Father as incense

day and night. All of that leads us to that which comes from humble steadfastness in prayer, in the Church, by the Body of Christ. Hear again words which resemble those which have historically closed sermons in the Church for decades, if not centuries. This describes reality for you who continue to follow the words of today's text as you await the Lord's coming: *and the peace of God, the one surpassing all understanding, will guard the hearts and the thoughts of all of you in Christ Jesus.*⁶

Advent IV Rorate Coeli, (One-year series)

Isaiah 45:8, Psalm 19:1; Deuteronomy 18:15-19; Philippians 4:4-7; John 1:19-28; Psalm 111

December 19, 2015

Pastor Michael L. Merhouse

Soli Deo Gloria

⁶ *Philippians 4:7.*