

The Word Gives Us Advent Joy

The Lord is near with...

† gentleness (vv.4,5)

† freedom from worry (v.6)

† peace on guard (v.7)

In the name of Jesus, our coming Lord, dear preparing Christians:

Sometimes it's fun to step back and try to look at things like an outside observer. So if you came from a different planet to watch American TV, listen to the radio, read blogs, newspapers and magazines, how would you summarize the most popular American pastime in one word? Answers would vary, but for me many Americans seem super busy with whining – a.k.a. “politically correct.” For instance many Native Americans were okay with “Indians” and consider it a compliment for athletic teams to be named “Chiefs” and “Redskins.” But did anyone ask them, or are we all just whining that people offend us?

Conservative pundits often lament we have “too much time on our hands.” But if that were the case, a prisoner with a pen should be the biggest whiner of all. Not so! Just as a star athlete sometimes takes a rookie “back to school,” so the Lord uses His Apostle Paul to teach us some valuable Advent lessons. Our Lord Jesus is preparing us for His second and final Advent. Whining isn't the only sin headed for the trash as **The Word Gives Us Advent Joy. *The Lord is near with...***

† gentleness (vv.4,5)

Maybe you get a little tired of the pastor always talking about Paul in prison. I can just hear it: “Doesn't he ever get out? He's in jail more than most American felons!” That's right, my friends. Of Paul's thirteen New Testament epistles, five of these letters were written from prison. (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 2 Timothy) If you ever doubted that the Bible is true or whether Christianity is real, this is one of the places you should look for enlightenment. Grab a copy of today's sermon off the Worship Table and read the five prison letters. They're all quite short. Then ask yourself: “Where else in all the world is there a religious book with a Hero who dies on a cross and his chief spokesmen imprisoned and killed?” Who would die for a lie? And if you wanted to make up a religion, wouldn't you skip the suffering part? Does this not at least suggest that humans did not invent this faith?

But that's way too logical. What would really be helpful is to go to the heart of this and ask yourself, “How would I feel if I gave up my prominent position in the academic, faith community, sacrificed all my possessions, and then ended up in prison?” No one would call it whining because that's what the ACLU is for, right? Organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union and Amnesty International demand justice for people wrongly imprisoned. Who would not welcome their voice if you were in chains? And who would not be bitter, unless another power was hard at work in your heart?

This is such a magnificent, practical miracle for the Lord's Apostle Paul to write to us like this in chains: ***“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”*** Pastor Paul is so full of caring concern that he just counseled two women about arguing, and a layman: ***“I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.”*** (vv.2f) This kind of **gentleness** can be felt as women work together, and men provide resources and strong arms to spread good cheer. **The Word Gives Us Advent Joy** that shows in priceless **gentleness** with one another. And why? Because ***“the Lord is near.”*** It's enough to give you...

† freedom from worry (v.6)

It reminds me of a story I heard about one of our congregations down south. On a church picnic in a public park a woman walked over and asked to speak with the pastor. “I can’t believe how much fun your people are having,” she said. “The men and women are talking together, working together, enjoying each other’s company. The kids are having a great time. You really let your light shine.”

People may say the same to you when they watch a crisis barrel down on your life while you just work through it. “I would be a wreck,” they’ll confide. “How can you be so calm?”

Now let’s be honest. Aren’t there times when you wish people would not ask you that? You can usually think of something else to say, but can you tell them the real reason? Or do your palms get sweaty while your heart starts racing and your voice squeaks out a few octaves too high? We’ve all been there, haven’t we, when someone asks us a faith question? There’s a word for this. It’s called “anxiety.” When anxiety launches an offensive it’s called a “panic attack.” And nothing seems to bring them on faster than someone asking a personal question about our faith. High anxiety is proof we fear man more than God who commands us to fear, love and trust in Him above all things. What shall we do?

Advent is a season of repentance. Strange as it may seem, nothing dumps high anxiety faster than confessing it as sin to God. Here’s His command as serious as, “Thou shalt not steal,” and “You shall not commit murder.” ***“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”*** That’s zero anxiety and 100% thanks, prayer and praise.

When I’m struggling with worry, discontent, whining, it feels like a tiny prison cell. But with Bible passages like this the Holy Spirit shines His light on a little door where you can only go through on your knees. The password is, “I’m sorry.” God’s answer is, “I forgive you.” And the freedom to drink in God’s love and lay out in the sunshine of God’s grace shines bright and beautiful when you start thanking God for whatever. Even through tears we triumph with, “Thank-you, God, for everything. I know this is no accident. You proved your love on the cross, your power Easter morning. Please give me **freedom from worry**. Dump my anxiety and replace it all with thanks, prayer and praise.”

† peace on guard (v.7)

And there, my friend, you are in a place of **peace**. Some people try to achieve tranquility by meditation that denies all suffering. Others try to run away into wild living and deadly sinful pleasure. But even our best efforts to “buck up” and stop whining ultimately ignore the real problem of sin that only the blood of Jesus Christ can wash away. Imagining no pain cannot take the pain away. A prisoner may feel free in his dreams but reality strikes back when he wakes up on cold, hard stone.

But this is what throws open the prison doors for body and soul: ***“The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** Did you notice? This does not say, “all *human* understanding.” God’s peace trumps every kind of understanding without limit or qualification. And this all-surpassing peace ***“will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”***

Peace on guard brings us full circle to why the Lord told us to ***“rejoice”*** in the first place. ***“Rejoice in the Lord”*** is where the rubber hits the road. If you keep your eyes on Jesus who died and rose in your place instead of glancing at the ditch or staring at oncoming headlights, you will keep moving down the highway of life toward the goal of heaven with godly success all along the way. That does not mean an ever flush bank account or freedom from pain and suffering. ***“We must go through many hardships,”*** many jagged rocks, ***“to enter the kingdom of God”*** (Acts 14:22) and the wide open spaces of heaven. But while we keep rejoicing ***“in the Lord,”*** He carries us over the bumps, through the gullies and up the mountain tops of His kind persuasion. The stupid and foolish things fear churns out, stay far away from your life while you follow Christ and trust in Him. Whiners worry about being happy, but **The Word Gives Us Advent Joy** no matter what happens. It’s enough to know, ***“the Lord is near”*** to give us His **gentleness, freedom from worry, peace on guard** for good. ***“Rejoice in the Lord.”*** Amen.

For the study behind this sermon or for copies email m.cordes@comast.net .
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