

“Joy is the Hand of God on the Shoulder of a Troubled World”

+ 3 Lent B +

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28

December 14, 2014`

This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it! The message for today is based on the lessons that were just read.

The link between the Gospel of Mark from last week and the Gospel of John we just heard is rather odd. Both readings end with John the Baptist saying, “There is one coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.” Being a Primary Grade Teacher and working my way through seminary with Preschoolers I have untied countless knots in shoelaces and tied countless more so children wouldn’t trip and fall. Watching my sister-in-law tie my brother’s shoes for him after his hip surgeries and quite often to this day more than a decade later I’ve come to see this simple gesture as a humble act of love. In the time of Jesus it was the lowliest servant who untied the laces of a guest come to visit so they could wash their feet from the grime of the street and then anoint the feet with a scented oil.

John saying he was not worthy of the task of the lowliest servant/slave must have been astounding for those who heard his words. Certainly he must be referring to the Messiah – the one who would come to fulfill the prophecies of Isaiah and others about the Messiah. How Israel had longed for those beautiful words to come true by the hand of the chosen One of God, the anointed, the One who would bring:

Good news to the oppressed, bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; comfort all who mourn; to give a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit...(so they would) display his (the Lord’s) glory.

Today on this third Sunday of Advent, we lit the third Advent candle—the rose candle because in the midst of this “Winter Lent” the lessons tell us to “Rejoice!” Oh, it’s evident in the Old Testament lesson and in the Epistle with Paul saying, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you,” and knowing whose sandals John was talking about, knowing that Jesus/Messiah has come but, well, with the report on CIA torture, the ongoing demonstrations in cities throughout the United States about police brutality and racial profiling is rejoicing really appropriate?

Yes – the answer is yes. Our evident rejoicing at all that God has done for us – our ability to rejoice in God’s good gift of faith, Christians Joy is the Hand of God on the Shoulder of a Troubled World.” Joy is a gift of God, a gift that we need in these days, in these holidays, when in a world of terrorism and road rage, estrangement and outsourcing, all is not calm and all is not bright. The writer of the Proverbs knew about this gift and our need for it writing, “A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.” (Proverbs 17. 22)

We who have been found by the love of God in Christ Jesus, washed clean of our sins and clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, named and claimed by God always have reason to rejoice – in all circumstances. The love Christians have for one another and for all others sets us apart, as Isaiah wrote, “Their descendants (the offspring of the Messiah) shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed.” Joel Osteen or other prosperity preachers would have you believe that blessing is in the possessions or things of this earth but I know people blessed beyond measure who have very little of the things of this world but shine with rejoicing in Jesus – in the gift of the one whose sandals John felt unworthy to untie. Not being able to rejoice in Jesus leaves one with the alternative of numbing yourself to everything good or bad or letting yourself become so bitter that all you have to share with others is misery.

Nevertheless, rejoicing always and in everything is a tall order. Praying without ceasing—that most often occurs when we’re desperate, when it is painfully obvious that “all we can do is pray.” Even then we falter, but, take heart, even Martin Luther had trouble with that. He admitted he’d never made it all the way through the Our Father without his thoughts getting distracted. Yup, Martin Luther was as distractible as Doug, the dog, in the movie *UP*.

Sad to think that when the “good times roll” our prayer lives slacken, but I don’t want to give you the idea that St. Paul was writing to those he dearly loved in Thessalonica to criticize them (or us, for that matter). Certainly the Thessalonians had as much trouble praying, thanking and rejoicing as we do. Their city was large and important in the world – they were surrounded by all the temptations that distract us today and all the evils you can imagine. Paul’s words were kind words of encouragement, not the sharp sting of rebuke, a reminder to remember.

I hadn't thought about it this way before, but that word "remember," isn't what we think it is. Most of us think that remembering is the opposite of forgetting. It isn't. The opposite of remembering is dismembering—cutting off. Remembering is re-connecting. Prayer is re-remembering us, reconnecting us to the God whom we know in Jesus. At the altar we are re-membered with the entire church on earth and in heaven and with Jesus, Himself, because of His word and promise to consecrate bread and wine "in remembrance" of Him – remembering as if we were right there with the disciples in the Upper Room sharing that first Lord's Supper with them.

As far as we know, 1 Thessalonians is quite likely the very first letter St. Paul wrote. That means it was written before A.D. 64 when Paul was martyred at the order of the Emperor Nero. Nero was quite a piece of work; whether he was responsible, as some think, for the fire that destroyed much of Rome or simply took advantage of it as urban renewal to clear the way to build something grand and glorious that he had in mind, while using the Christians as scapegoats is not absolutely certain. This much we do know about him. He did not "fiddle while Rome burned," because fiddles hadn't been invented yet and, a little later after having Paul beheaded and Peter crucified, Nero also murdered his mother.

The point is this: the world has always been a dangerous place and we do live in dangerous times – though we don't have to worship in hiding or fear being arrested for identifying ourselves as Christians, as the Thessalonians might have feared. And like them we still get sick. We still lose jobs. We still hurt one another. We still die. We are not governed by a crazy Caesar, but we are a divided, angry nation with so many issues that must be dealt with for our country to survive.

So, today, we hear a voice crying out in the wilderness – a voice crying out with hope and rejoicing to remind us to remember who we are, how we have been washed, named, claimed - Whose we are and where we are headed. Know always and rejoice greatly that you belong to Jesus. Being held in the love of Jesus is reason enough to "rejoice always, to pray without ceasing and to give thanks in all circumstances" so that others might see that joy, the hope within us, through our words and actions come to know and feel the hand of God on their shoulder in the midst of their troubles – whatever condition or circumstance they are in and come to know Jesus as their Savior, as well. Amen.

Now may our faithful God stir our souls and open our hearts to hear His word, and in hearing it, bear faithful witness to it.