

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

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Advent is a season of watching, fasting, and praying in preparation for the mysterious feast of the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, and so has been around in the life of the Church probably as long as the church has celebrated the birth of Christ. The beginnings of it are as simple as this conversation that might of taken place between two people in the first century: "Peace be with you, Claudius. Let's celebrate the birth of Jesus"; and the other person says, "Okay, Jakob, so let's go get ready for it." As simple as that; voila, the concept of Advent is born. Then it wouldn't take long after that for early church leaders to consider how to prepare by choosing appropriate weekly reading of the scriptures.

The theme of this particular Sunday, Rejoice, for at least 1600 years always two Sundays before Christmas, has been assisting the Church in preparation for the Coming of Christ. And today, in this small corner of the world, we, All Saints Parish, are able to be encouraged by this particular day, ourselves, , to understand even more, essentials of the work of prayer for that preparation that we have in our search for a new pastor and priest.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, or Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So I want to take this time to recall points from last week's first sermon on prayer, in tandem with our 30 days of prayer.

First, waiting and watching and listening for Jesus is indeed a matter of the Spirit, and yet throughout the Holy Scriptures we are exhorted and commanded to "work" at the disciplines of discipleship, perhaps the most important being prayer itself. The reason we have to work at it, and practice it, despite the great desire of the Holy Spirit to speak and lead us, is an easy answer. The Garden of Eden. That was easy living. Then we failed to follow through on what we easily heard from God. But, only being able to blame ourselves. God invited us to leave Paradise, and head off to life and now death, and in between, all that was easy is now blood, sweat and tears. Including hearing what used to be the clear and audible voice of God.

Thanks be to God, however, for Jesus Christ, who took upon himself the wages of our sins, so that we might have eternal life with him. And the Spirit is given to us in power so that we might serve him best. Thus we are able, as Jesus implies in teaching the Lord's Prayer, to actually address our desire to talk to God, right to God our Father. What a metanoia. What a turnaround from being banned from Eden.

Still, like any relationship here on earth, a good relationship takes a desire to make it work. Not working at a relationship will cause it to, well, not be much of a relationship. That's your pew potato. And that's what we're talking about here with prayer, a primary means of creating and maintaining a relationship between God and his people.

So the second thing is that because if we are not practiced or up to speed in our prayer lives we might conceivably MISS the Coming of Christ; prayer and retuning and reclaiming our prayer lives is in fact an extremely appropriate work, then, for the season of Advent. Since we weren't there for the first coming of the Lord, and the Lord God has provided the means of entering into relationship with him, it is now so important to make sure that the Incarnation of Jesus has been accepted by us in belief, and by baptism that we have agreed to turn from everything else and follow him. And not miss the second coming as believers. And assist by proclamation and service those who do not yet believe, to hear s the Good News of Kingdom of God, and so join

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us in our hope and gladness for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. And our Christmas celebration.

The third point is this – you can learn again. You can grow from wherever you are in your prayer life, that is, your daily relationship with God. This is the purpose of the 30 days of prayer. It is essential for you and this parish. Again, first, God's plan is to bring you into the kingdom of God in faith and baptism. And then God's plan is to send you, by the grace meant to be endowed through Confirmation, to do the work of the kingdom.

You will definitely need to be listening and talking to God, and so your training and re-training is foundational.

I believe this is critical for you. I believe that God has plans for you as a parish, as I've already mentioned for you, for your family, and your larger circles of influence. He wants to show you his plans for you. He is eager to have you discover them because they are beyond anything you could imagine. Yes, the basic plan for your life and for everyone's life is your salvation, and your serving the Lord.

And then there is more. Paul says in Ephesians, and we use this scripture sentence at the end of Morning and Evening Prayer, “Glory to God whose power, working in us, can accomplish more than we could ever ask or imagine.”

God's plans have three characteristics - they usually originate in impossible situations, have somewhat irrational solutions and end in incredible results. Kind of like trying to wrap your minds and souls around the somewhat irrational notion of trying to find a priest to be your new Rector who “perfectly fits” right in here at All Saints. Think of impossible situations of Abram, Debra, Gideon, again Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel! Think of the amazing dispersal of the entire New Testament Jerusalem church through persecution as recorded in Acts 8. Everyone had to leave their homes, businesses, families. Talk about an impossible situation - what was God doing? But he certainly did something, didn't he. Was each case as simple as waiting and watching and listening and then acting? Yes. And the world was turned upside down.

In her little book of stories about "listening prayer" the missionary to India Mary Ghee tells the story of an evangelist who was having incredible success in the conversion of those of the Hindu faith, while Mary had had very little success. She asked him that, and the evangelist told her that the secret was teaching the Hindus how to listen to Jesus. They must ask for something specific and then wait quietly for an answer. In seeking an answer they had to meditate on a passage of Scripture and as they filled their minds with God's Word, an idea would form they should write down and then do what is said. God guided and answered their various requests in utterly unexpected ways.

Whether then, or now, that is as simple as it gets, my friends in Christ; and it's also nice to know that it's the same strategy no matter whether in Judea, India, or in San Diego. Because “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and for ever.”

These kinds of powerful responses by God to our impossible situations should invoke at least the responses of Rejoicing, and Thanksgiving. Let's look at rejoicing. It is a command, it is a response, it is a voice from within us, and may even be carried out in jumping, and dancing, and singing, and shouting. It is a sharing with God, which makes it part of prayer. It is a way to keep the Enemy at bay since you are pointing to the Lord's authority and action and love as your solution. One of the basics tools we are given for developing our prayer life, that is, Rejoicing!!

What an incredible prophetic word from Isaiah, every aspect of what rejoicing is all about, noun, verb, adverb, becoming, creating, initiating, receiving, all so much that we need to learn for our prayer lives

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18 But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.
19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.
Before they call I will answer!”

Rejoicing. Look at what God has done, and now conceive that God can do more, and do it through you – all. Rejoicing, is not only a warmth of the spirit, your spirit, as you consider all that God has done, it is also a matter of the will. Just like giving thanks, and forgiving others. And so we choose to show and speak our gladness with God. I am so glad that God is God. I am so glad that the Father knows my name. I rejoice! J.B. Phillips translated Philippians 4:4, “rejoice, and again I say rejoice” in this way:

“Delight yourselves in the Lord; yes, find your joy in him at all times.”

Exhilarating, and perhaps overwhelming. And look - even God can take delight in us, so then we in turn can learn to take delight in God,

One question that comes is what can I do to bring forward joy and rejoicing if I don't seem to feel it.

Bishop Austin Pardue, who was the Episcopal bishop of the diocese of Pittsburgh in his short book entitled, “Prayer Works”, said that “Joy comes from praise and thanksgiving. Do you want the joy that gives you the vitality of health, and the courage that faces every problem with calm Christian fortitude? You may have it by learning how to personally praise God and thank Him.” And then he went on to say, “An attitude of gratitude is the way in which you can get your foot in the door of joyful, positive, and healthful living.” “I suggest a simple plan. When you waken each morning before leaving your bed, say over these words from the Bible several times: “This is the day which the Lord hath made. I will rejoice and be glad in it.” It is here, it is yours, it is up to you.”

Basically, the good bishop is noting that too many Christian people wake up in the morning despairing, feeling hopelessness, deadened, disinterested dullness, a great discouragement with the purposes of everyday living. You have the means to counteract, both as a matter of the will, and realizing the benefit that comes from other disciplines like thanksgiving. So if one is rejoicing, by definition, one cannot be despairing. And even more in rejoicing, when you realize it is the Lord who is the source and cause of rejoicing. You will practice this work during the 30 Days of prayer.

What about thanksgiving? Are there signs that might point to what's happening when thanksgiving is not taking place? Yes, fearfulness, which is the root of anxiety and worry. The practice of giving thanks, both to God in prayer, and to others around you, will work to relieve these things. It is very simple...when you worry, it usually means you feel out of control, and fearful of what might happen, and attempting to find the solution to these intangibles within yourself. Suddenly, it becomes a loss of faith in God. Instead of worrying, a person ought to converse directly with God and lay out before him all that is on his or her mind. Why? You talk to God confident that God has a solution even if you can't see it, and faith that God will hear and actually respond. So giving thanks is the practice of trusting in God. The more you give credit to God by giving thanks, the more likely you are to give thanks to God the next time around, even before a solution has been acquired. Like looking for a new priest, yet thanking God that He knows who, and that He will provide. This is the meaning of Pauls' words in Thessalonians, to give thanks in all circumstances.

The good effect of thanksgiving otherwise will be to open ears and lips of petition and intercession, And once you've opened up, you've learned a valuable lesson in listening to God, and your prayer life takes steps forward in maturity.

Just wait until you hear the voice of god in some means. Like John the baptizer, you too

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will be filled with thanksgiving and rejoicing. He said, He who has the bride is the bridegroom; the FRIEND of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice; therefore this joy of mine is now full. "

What a wonderful blessed circle: you choose to give thanks, and you allow yourself rejoicing. IN return you hear the voice of God speaking love to you. And as a result you rejoice in the Lord and offer more thanksgiving.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

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