

Bethlehem Lutheran Church
A Reconciling Works Congregation of the ELCA welcoming the LGBTQ community
- A multicultural, all-inclusive ecumenical ministry

P.O. Box 338 | 838 W. Hallandale Beach Boulevard, Hallandale Beach, FL 33009
Phone 954-454-2954 | Fax 954-454-2992 | Info@BLCHallandale.org
BLCHallandale.org | BLCHallandaleBlog.com | Facebook.com/BLCHallandale | Twitter.com/BLCHallandale

The Rev. Dr. David O. Guss, Fr., Ph.D.

December 17, 2017 – 3rd Sunday of Advent
“Rejoice Always!”

It is always interesting to read messages children write to Santa Claus each year. For example, listen to letters to Santa: 1) “Dear Santa, “Could you come early this year? I’ve been really super good, but I don’t know if I can last much longer. Please hurry. Love, Jordan.” Now there’s an honest young man. 2) “Dear Santa, “Mommy says you only bring presents for good little boys. That isn’t fair. (Signed) Brian.” Sounds like Brian has already failed the test for being good. But, I especially like this one from Jenny: 3) “Dear Santa, “Please give me a doll this year. I would like her to eat, walk, do my homework, and clean my room. Thank you. (Signed) Jenny.” I understand Jenny’s Mom has asked Santa for that identical doll.

Well, welcome to the 3rd Sunday of Advent and today we turn our attention to – not a message to Santa, but a message, an announcement if you will, that comes from Isaiah in today’s Old Testament for the 3rd Sunday of Advent. Let us please read these words together from verse 1 and the 1st part of verse 2 of today’s 1st lesson in our inserts “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor...”

Later on in Luke’s Gospel, chapter 4, we are told Jesus was in Galilee teaching in the synagogues, he went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he stood up to read this very passage from Isaiah from today’s Old Testament lesson. Luke tells us after Jesus read these words, the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. Then, Jesus said something breathtaking: Verse 4:21 says, “21 Then, he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” This was a message that his listeners did not want to hear. Luke tells us” 28 “When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage. 29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. 30 But, he passed through the midst of them and went on his way?” (28-30). That’s quite a powerful reaction to just a few words spoken by anyone.

Well, Jesus managed to escape, but his words generated some powerful emotions. Why – for the same reason they still stir powerful emotions today. We want Jesus to stick to religion, not talk about the needs of the poor, prisoners, or those with handicapping conditions. If Jesus had just talked about prayer or reading the Bible, nobody would have cared. But, here he was meddling with issues that hit too close to home, and that made people angry. It still does. The words we just read from Isaiah come as close to anything in the Gospels to explaining Christ’s mission statement. It consists of a series of announcements - announcements which clearly declare who Christ is and what Christ is all about. Christ has been anointed by God’s Spirit to 1) announce good news to the poor, 2) to announce freedom for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, that the oppressed might be set free, and 3) to announce the year of the Lord’s favor. In other words Jesus came into the world to bring us JOY! That is what the pink candle on our Advent wreath stands for today JOY! That is why we sing the hymn at Christmas time – Joy to the world, the Lord has come!”

And, all this talk about joy brings us to our 2nd lesson this morning from I Thessalonians 5, verse 16, which contains only 2 words ... making it 1 of the shortest verses in the Bible, but what a perfect verse for the 3rd Sunday in Advent. The words of this short verse are, “Rejoice always.” That’s clear enough, isn’t it? It doesn’t say, “Rejoice sometimes.” It doesn’t say, “Rejoice when times are good and the economy is strong.” It doesn’t even say, “Rejoice during the Advent-Christmas season.” It says simply, “Rejoice always.” It could just as well say, “Sing ‘Jingle Bells’ at a funeral.”

Certainly, the Christmas season gives us many opportunities for joy. We are surrounded by reminders that this is a season for being glad. But, the writer of Thessalonians would have us experience joy all year long. He would have us experience joy when the carols, the lights, and the nativity scenes have all been put away. How do we do that? We do that by reading the rest of the sentence from I Thessalonians. The 2 words, “Rejoice always,” are only the 1st phrase in a sentence that has 3 parts. Let’s read the entire sentence from our 2nd lesson this morning which is the 1st verse in our 2nd lesson. Let’s read together: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Sisters and brothers, these are the keys to having the Christmas spirit in your life at all times - “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...”

Now let me ask you this morning, “What does your “rejoicing in the Lord” and “rejoicing in your soul ” look like? Verse 16 reads, “Rejoice always.” Paul is 1st saying to us, joy is the primary characteristic of being a Christian. If you do not have joy in your life, you

need to examine your Christian faith and see what is the problem. Theologian Marcus Borg notes that the words “joy” and “jewel” come from the same root words. Like a jewel, joy is of great value and beauty. But, unlike a jewel, it can neither be purchased nor possessed. It is a gift. We cannot make joy happen and we cannot own it. As the Apostle Paul says, joy is 1 of the primary gifts of the Spirit. Joy comes from God. Joy is God’s will for us. Joy does not come from having life figured out. Joy comes from relaxing oneself in knowing we are loved.

There are many people who rob themselves of joy because they think that they have to be able to fully understand life. Let me assure you that will never happen. That’s what it means to live by faith. We don’t need to understand everything that happens in life, but we do need to know the difference between joy and pleasure. C. S. Lewis used to talk about the difference between joy and pleasure. He tells us joy comes from within. It is steady and abiding. Pleasure, on the other hand, comes and goes. It is extrinsic because it arises from the outside. When circumstances change in 1 direction, pleasure comes. When fortune reverses, pleasure leaves. We have our small pleasures, and that’s fine. But, 1 day they will fail us. Joy will never fail us. Joy resides within and undergirds us regardless of what is happening on the outside. So, I say to you this morning, if you believe in Jesus Christ and your heart is not filled with joy, ask God for it. It is your birthright as one who has given your life to Jesus. Christmas is a perfect time to do that. Joy is not only the privilege, but also the responsibility of a Christian. It is our witness to the world that God is alive. And, so if you know that Christ is your Savior, if you know that God loves you, if you know that your life has meaning and purpose and that you have a Friend who will stand with you through eternity, how can you not feel a sense of joy? “Rejoice always.”

Finally, Paul reminds us in our 2nd lesson, that in our joy we are to pray continually, “without ceasing,” he says and “to give thanks in all circumstances.” Paul is telling us to cultivate a sense of God’s presence within us - a presence that we carry with us always. When Paul tells us to pray, he is telling us that prayer should not be a ritual where we always pray , “Father, forgive me of my sins, take care of my family, God is great, God is good, now we thank God for our food.” Rather, when Paul says to us, “pray continually,” he is telling us to get to the very heart of prayer. Live in God’s presence. Let God’s Spirit so fill us that every moment is touched by God’s glory and love.

And, when it comes to “giving thanks in all circumstances,” Paul is saying we need to develop a profound sense of gratitude in our lives that that holds on to us regardless of our circumstances. Let me ask you, have you thought about that old Gospel hymn “Count your many blessings, 1 by 1 lately”? Look at the circumstances we are enduring in our lives these days inside and outside of our church this morning. Things are not perfect. There are challenges. But, is God still giving us a place to worship? But, think about it - when we wake up in the morning, we have God to thank for waking us up each new day. Rejoice always, even when things are not going well for you, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances – the joy of Jesus has the power to transform your life.

On this 3rd Sunday of Advent, ask God for joy if you do not have it in your life already. Joy is your privilege and responsibility as a follower of Jesus Christ. The joy that Jesus gives is at prophecy fulfilled – “The spirit of the Lord God is upon each one of you this morning, the Lord was sent to bring Good News to you, to bind up those who are brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” The message of this 3rd Sunday of Advent is an announcement of the Joy to the World, the joy that Jesus has come to bring to you and me this day! Accept this joy of Jesus in your life today, now, and forever more. Amen.

<http://www.BLCHallandale.org>