

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent – December 13, 2015

Church of the Epiphany, Richmond, Virginia

David H. Knight, Interim Rector

Send us your Spirit, God, to open our hearts and our minds to your word, and strengthen us to live according to your will, in Jesus Name. Amen.

The other day as I was driving on my way to some parish calls my radio was tuned to NPR where the author of a book she had written was being discussed. Her book was the result of her study about what we can do to bring wellness into our lives both at home as well as in the market place and where we work. I was not able to hear her discussion to its conclusion and I even missed the name of her book, but I heard enough of what she said to be intrigued by one piece of wisdom which was graphic enough to grab my attention. She said, "I am by nature a worrier. My tendency is to worry about a lot of things, yet I have come to the realization that worrying as a means of solving a problem is like trying to solve an algebra problem with chewing gum." I thought, "That'll preach." Worrying in order to solve a problem is like trying to solve an algebra problem with chewing gum. Does that make sense? I think it does! Few, if any of us are spared from worry. As parents and even grandparents we find that there are those times when we worry about our children or their children. I can remember, for example, getting a call from one of our sons when he was in college. It was late at night. He was worried about something and needed to talk. And we listened. After we hung up, Jeannie and I lay awake and couldn't get to sleep. Some time later on, our son thanked us and told us that after he called us that night he felt much better and

was able to go to bed and go right to sleep! That was great especially as his parents lay awake and worried. Worry will get us nowhere!

We worry about health issues , our own, or of those we love. We worry about the unknown. On a more global level, we worry about our country or the state of the world. Like many, I worry about our nation as I listen to the political rhetoric coming from the mouths of some of those aspiring to be the nominee of their party for the White House. We are being subjected to an unprecedented display of arrogance and rudeness together with some very frightening proposals that speak, among other things, of plans to marginalize groups of people who are part of our nation. Such proposals are contrary to the principles upon which this nation was founded and are certainly contrary to the Gospel. Such rhetoric builds on fear and further creates more fear among many who are already worried and fearful. In today's gospel reading from Luke, John the Baptist warned those who came to him that they should bear fruits worthy of repentance. That warning is for us as a nation as well. Somehow, we must turn our focus in a different direction and not let our fear and worry cause us to lose our moral compass as a nation. Worry and fear will get us nowhere.

You have your own list of worries some of which are as close to home as worrying how during this busy season you will get everything done. We worry about things we have done and we worry about things we have left undone. It might be helpful to stop and think about what the woman on NPR said last week, that worrying about a problem in order to solve it is like trying to solve an algebra problem with chewing gum. It's good advice, yet if you are like me, realizing that worrying is not helpful is one thing. Being able to put worry aside is another.

On this Third Sunday of Advent we hear from Paul's letter to the Philippians ,

"The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God."

That's what Paul wrote to his Philippian friends. "Do not worry about anything..."

Paul is writing to a community to whom he has become attached. Throughout his letter his affection for them becomes obvious. The central message of this letter is a message of joy. Paul calls his friends to rejoice. He says to them, "The Lord is near."

On this Third Sunday of Advent, our scriptures remind us of God's promise to be near us. In the first reading from Zephaniah we hear the promise that the Lord is in our midst, you shall fear disaster no more... Do not fear... do not let your hands grow weak. In the gospel from Luke this morning, John the Baptist said to the crowds, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance." An important part of that repentance, perhaps a most important part of that repentance is a turning in the direction of being able to accept myself for who I am, a beloved child of God. As we heard in last week's Gospel, God is preparing the way for the reality that God will be near us in all that we encounter.

On this Third Sunday of Advent Paul's reminder to his beloved Philippian community is a reminder to us as well as he says, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, make your requests known to God." Paul's counsel to his friends and to us as well to counter the anxiety of our lives with prayer is no simple advice. Prayer does not mask the fear and uncertainty that we all feel from time to time. Rather it is a call to take our fears and our

worries and place them into the presence of God in our prayers and then to be patient and to allow God to refashion, to transform those fears.

I remember once hearing a sermon by a colleague when I was serving as St. Stephen's in which she spoke of how she began to find peace from her fears by being thankful for little things, such that when she was worried she would come to look for things for which she could be grateful. She told about how her father had died suddenly when she was young and the very foundation of her life had been shattered. Somehow, by the grace of God, she began to discover over time little things that brought her peace. Something led her to begin to look for things for which she could be grateful. Her fear and her worry began to transform into a peace that she had not known before. It was a peace that surpassed her understanding.

This Advent season calls you and me once again to the knowledge and to the experience that we are not alone. The promise is that God is near. God is near us in any wilderness in which you and I may find ourselves. God is near us in our worries and in our fears. God will appear to us in moments of grace. God is near us here in this parish as we look to the future and where that might be leading to. Let us take comfort and let us take heart that we are God's beloved, that God gives to us that peace in the midst of all we may encounter.

I remember some years ago now, at the end of the service when the priest came to pronounce the blessing, the one that begins, "The peace of God which passeth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds..." then he paused. He said, "Did you hear that? The peace of God which passeth understanding?" And then he finished the blessing. I have never forgotten that brief moment in that service

many years ago. I have never pronounced that blessing or heard it pronounced without being reminded that yes, God's peace comes to us so often in moments that indeed pass our understanding. We can trust, however, that when that peace has come even for a brief time, and it will come again.

This coming week, in the midst of some worry that you might have, may you know the peace of God which passes understanding. May you in the days ahead experience God's love, mercy, and hope, and may you know that you are loved for who you are right now, for the Lord is near... and may

"...the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Amen.