

Rejoice in the Lord Always

(Philippians 4:4-7)

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Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

Do not worry about anything,

but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving,

let your requests be made known to God.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,

will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Today we mark the 3rd Sunday of Advent, a season of waiting for the coming of Christ into a world that stumbles in darkness, both spiritual and physical. The lowering skies of these three weeks, and the menacing atmosphere in our global relationships, have certainly contributed to our somber spirits. We want Christmas to come: we want joy and peace.

In his online column, Episcopal priest Justin Holcomb provides some insight into the history of this season. He reminds us what we already know, that the word “advent” derives from the Latin “adventus,” which means “coming.” Scholars believe that in the 4th and 5th centuries, in Spain and Gaul [i.e., France] Advent was a season of preparation for new Christians, who would be baptized at the feast of the Epiphany, the day when the Magi arrived at the manger and honored the Christ-child with gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Those who wished to become Christians at Epiphany spent 40 days in penance, prayer, and fasting to prepare themselves for baptism. In those years, there was no connection between Advent and the birth of Jesus on Christmas.

By the sixth century, Roman Christians had connected Advent to the coming of Christ: not Christ in the manger in Bethlehem, but Christ in his second coming in clouds as the judge of the world. Not until the

Middle Ages did Christians connect the Advent season with Christ's first coming at Christmas.

Our secular culture says that Advent is simply the four weeks leading to the birth of the infant Jesus. It is four weeks of decorating the house, shopping for gifts, baking cookies. As people of faith we have our feet in both the secular and the spiritual interpretation of these weeks.

Theologian Karl Barth reminds us that "the promise for Israel and the promise for the church is Jesus Christ; he has come, and he will come again. This is the essence of Advent."

Advent is the season when we hold our breath, waiting for Jesus to arrive. We don't sing Christmas carols until Christmas eve, much to the frustration of my husband, who grew up in the Presbyterian Church, which sang Christmas carols all through Advent. We sing instead "Advent" carols, hymns of expectation for the arrival of Jesus both as infant redeemer, and as conqueror of sin and death. Listen to hymn 66, verse 3, which we will sing this morning:

*Born thy people to deliver, born a child and yet a king,
Born to reign in us forever, now thy gracious kingdom bring.*

In this text Jesus is the Savior the Israelites imagined; he is the Savior Christians of every generation looked to in hope. And now he is miraculously here, ready to gather the world in his arms, leading all people into a day of reconciliation.

Most of us have been through many seasons of Advent, many eves of Christmas. And yet we are a hopeful people who believe that Jesus came to the earth—more than two thousand years ago—to a people under the thumb of the Roman Empire and its Israelite lackies.

We are a hopeful people, and so we believe in his resurrection, both to the people who witnessed him on that first Easter, and to those of us who have experienced smaller resurrections in our lives. We are a hopeful

people, and so we believe that he will come again in great power and glory to rescue the world from its woes. We believe that the promises recorded by the prophet Zephaniah will come to pass. We don't know exactly how that will happen, but we still gather on the Sundays of Advent, as we do every Sunday, to break bread and give thanks. We sing carols for our friends who are homebound. We drop coins and bills in a bell-ringer's bucket. We gather gifts for a family who lacks our riches. We deck the church with greens and poinsettias, and with the crèche, where Mary and Joseph await the arrival of their son, the king we hope will show us how to heal our broken world.

Every Sunday we also pray for our brothers and sisters throughout the world. In this season of growing darkness, those prayers focus even more strongly on the needs of a world gone astray: a world that is sorrowful; a world that needs comfort; a world where we can carry light and hope to our friends and neighbors; a world whose Lord and Maker sent Jesus to show us the way to life and light.

And so we pray in these days of growing darkness: "Lord Jesus, you are the light that has come into the world. Be present with us this morning as we worship you in word and sacrament. Instill in us the courage to testify to your light in the midst of darkness so that we—like your followers of every generation—might bring hope to all who seek your love and peace. In your name we pray. Amen."