

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent December 13, 2020
And Yet, We Rejoice Always The Rev. Robin Teasley

*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.
May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24*

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. John 1:6-8

This week Facebook reminded me that 2 years ago we had so much snow in December that the church was closed for the Second Sunday of Advent. We were so disappointed, and yet, Christmas arrived anyway. Here we are on the Third Sunday of Advent and church is again closed. This time though, the unexpected weather and eleven inches of snow is not the reason. The reason was not unexpected, we knew it was coming, even so, we are disappointed. And yet, Christmas will happen even if we cannot be in church together. The church is not the building, it is the community of believers. We are never without the presence of Christ, who is within us and around us always.

In his letter to the Thessalonian church, Paul exhorts the people of God to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstance; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. He's writing this to a people suffering persecution and hardship in the first century. They were probably fearful, angry and grieving losses.

Paul could be writing to us today. The rapid increase in COVID cases and deaths has now interrupted another major church holy day. As of this weekend we are averaging 3,000 deaths each day from the virus – this is about the number we lost on 9-11. The political climate and mood across our nation has stirred up our frustrations, our anger, our quick tempers. These days, any change in our expectations all too often results in an immediate reaction, and often it is an unkind reaction. When we are stressed and upset, our emotions can get the best of us.

Maybe you remember a children's book entitled "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" by Judith Viorst. In this story a young boy, Alexander, is having an awful day from the moment he wakes up with bubble gum stuck in his hair. He is sure that moving away to Australia is the solution to his problems. Some of the many terrible things that happen to him that day are: no prize in his cereal at breakfast, having to sit in the middle seat on the ride to school, no dessert in his lunch, having to eat lima beans for dinner, and his night light burning out at bedtime. His mom reminds him that some days are like that, even in Australia.

We are having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad year in 2020, are we not? I am sure each one of us could write our own story listing all the negatives, the frustrations, the disappointments, the angers, the griefs and the losses in our own year. Chief among them for us

as Christians, are the loss of corporate worship, and the loss of our Eucharistic Feast together. We cannot worship here together for the remainder of Advent or on Christmas Eve. We don't know how long we'll be worshipping from home. And we can't all move to Australia, as good as that might seem right now. This year has been more challenging than any we can remember, and yet, as Christians we are called to rejoice always. So how do we do that?

Perhaps this is where John can help us. John is usually known as the Baptizer or the Baptist, but according to the writer of the Gospel of John, he is known as the Witness. "There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." John the Witness endured many of his own very bad days. He spoke truth to power and his head was cut off, and yet he never veered from his calling to proclaim Christ, because he knew who he was. He knew who he was and what he was called to do.

We too are sent by God to be witnesses. As followers of Christ we have been commissioned to proclaim the good news. We do this all the time, in everything that we do and say. Like Alexander we are all going to have some bad days. And yet, the good news in Christ assures us that we belong to God, that Christ is within us always and everywhere.

We can be a witness to God's power and love even in the midst of great challenge, even when it seems like, looks like, a terrible horrible no good very bad year. When we belong to God we know that as we worship from home we are powerfully connected by the Spirit and are living out Jesus' commandment - the love of God and neighbor.

And that brings us back to the Thessalonians and Paul's words to them. When we know who we are and what we have been called to do as Christians, then no one even has to ask us who we are. It is evident in our words and actions; it shines forth from us like a light.

When we understand who we are in the kingdom of God, new life and great joy well up within us, overflowing on everyone around us. Joy becomes tangible as we love and care for others, as we minister to others in their wilderness, and as we make level the places of oppression, injustice and suffering in this world.

What brings you joy, even on your worst days? Hot coffee, a call from a friend, a walk in the warming sun, humming your favorite Advent hymn, or taking time to create something of beauty? Maybe you rejoice in a gorgeous sunset sky, Christmas lights, or warm blankets. Perhaps we rejoice in purchasing a gift for an angel, providing a Christmas meal for the hungry, or in choosing to react in kindness when plans beyond our control are changed?

John's testimony of Jesus echoes across time and we are reminded to thoughtfully consider our own testimonies of word and deed—do our lives witness to the light of God within? In the midst of darkness God sent Light into the world. We reflect that light as we rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances. Even on the terrible horrible no good very bad days. Amen.