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Advent 3 C – Dec. 12, 2022

“An Unbreakable Christmas”

Read: Philippians 4: 4 - 7 /Memorize: Philippians 4: 6 - 7

I don't want to make anybody anxious, but Christmas is only 14/13 days from today. Are you ready? And what does “being ready for Christmas” look like for you? Is it all about decorations and presents? Maybe family gatherings? Or might it be about your plans for worship or more?

I notice there was an intake of air when I mentioned how soon Christmas is. Perhaps you're wondering, can you get it all done? Maybe you don't want to get it all done? Christmas can be a challenging time for many.

Our most important preparation is to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus. A couple was heading towards a Christmas party done by their local Lion's Club. They had collected gifts for forty children. As they were arriving, they learned that there would be sixty children there.

They were in a quandary. They prayed that God would provide for these other children. As they were going in, a gentleman asked why they looked so sad. They explained. He was the local representative for the Marine Corps Toys for Tots program. Within 20 minutes, they had their extra toys and no disappointed children.

No matter what your Christmas preparations look like, I hope you will experience the love, joy, hope and peace of God now, and forever. We know that Jesus' coming was not about a day. Jesus came into the world to make eternity possible for all of us. There is no gift to compare to that one.

Paul knew what it was like to have every form of success and loss, but he counted that as rubbish compared to the joy of knowing Jesus. His writings are full of that love, joy, hope and peace of God that changed his life, which he in turn, shared with others to change their lives.

Here is his special message for those going through a difficult time: “Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” Philippians 4: 4 – 7.

It’s easy to rejoice in good times, but Paul said to do it always. Paul is in jail and the Philippian church is in trouble. He hopes to bring healing to the church. He’s writing this letter to get them to reconcile.

In the midst of his imprisonment and this conflict, Paul is encouraging them to rejoice, not in the situations, but in God’s presence and blessings. He is hoping that they may have a new appreciation for how much they really have, rather than be tortured by the demon of discontent.

Bishop Kenneth Shablin tells a story many parents can relate to. His young son, Ken Jr. was five years old. He wanted a red toy truck for Christmas. He made sure that was clear. His letter to Santa Claus was focused on one item: a red toy truck. He was not disappointed. He ignored all his other presents.

A few hours later Shablin heard the little boy crying. He found him holding his red truck in one hand and the truck wheels in the other. The poor little guy looked to his father and cried, “Daddy, my Christmas is broken already!”

His whole Christmas had been wrapped up in one gift. When it was broken, it broke his whole Christmas. We’re not very different than that little boy. If the gift we desired isn’t there, doesn’t last long or isn’t quite right, we can also fall apart and think of our Christmas as “broken.”

Even as some struggle with material poverty, there is also a spiritual poverty we need to address. We need something to put our hope in, something that is more meaningful and lasting than decorations, parties and gifts.

A number of years ago a young woman’s father became sick. She lived some distance away, but visited him as often as possible. She tried to share her faith but he did not seem interested. She told her father that she was praying for him, he responded simply, “You keep doing that.” It was the very first sign of even the tiniest bit of hope that her father was open to the idea of God.

When she got home, she wrote a note to him. She closed the letter in this way: “My prayer at this moment is that you will take from God the gift of eternal life by receiving Jesus into your heart.” Three days before Christmas her father died.

After the funeral, her father’s caregiver approached her. She wanted her to know that her father had found peace with God. How joyful she was to know how important that faith was and that he had now accepted it.

Christmas is a good time to remind ourselves that the “more” we desire has nothing to do with gifts, money or anything like that. What we long for, what would really make a difference in our lives is to know God more closely. When we know the God of Peace we receive the peace of God.

Think about this: none of the characters, not Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men; not even Elizabeth or Zachariah really understood what God was doing. Mary knew to expect a child but she really could not understand what that was going to mean. But there is one thing they had in common: they knew the God of peace. They knew that the God of peace, the great I Am, had chosen them for a very special purpose.

At Advent and Christmas time our minds naturally move toward the hope of peace on earth, good will toward men. The peace that God wants us to have goes beyond this time of year. We long for the peace of God which can only come when we thank Him for our present and trust Him for our future.

That’s what Paul was saying to the Philippians as he spoke these words, “Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

His readers recognized that Paul lived those words out in his life. Despite all the difficulties he faced, despite the sadness he felt at hearing that the church he had founded in Philippi was now conflicted, he was a man on fire for God and completely at peace.

How could that be? The answer is he knew Jesus. He had met Emmanuel, God with us. He knew that he could trust every moment of his life, present

circumstances and future challenges to God. Paul knew God loved him so much that He humbled Himself to live our life and die our death, so we could have eternal life.

Because he knew Jesus, he could live with peace in the present and gratitude for the future. Can you do the same? Because you know Jesus can you trust Him that no matter what you can rejoice in God?

Don't miss the purpose of Christmas. God came to bring us peace. What does that peace do in our lives? It transcends all understanding and it guards our hearts and minds. Hundreds of years before Jesus was born, people were writing about His coming. They had heard the promise of God that the Messiah would come and they trusted Him.

We know the Messiah has come. We are no longer waiting for the baby born in Bethlehem. He now sits at the right hand of God. Jesus' name tells us everything we need to know about Him: "Emmanuel, God with us."

No matter how out of control our lives may feel at times, God's purpose and promises never change. The God of peace came in human form to bring peace in our lives, so we can share it. When you receive Jesus into your heart you receive the God of peace. His Holy Spirit comes to live in you to keep you in that peace. Now may that peace, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus until life everlasting. Amen