

The Third Sunday of Advent

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Zephaniah 3:14-18a
<i>Response</i>	Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.”
<i>Psalm</i>	Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6
<i>Second Reading</i>	Philippians 4:4-7
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 3:10-18

The third Sunday of Advent for year C brings us to a passage which I have absolutely no right to comment on, and that is Paul’s teaching against anxiety. Alright. When I told my wife I’d be talking about this, she chuckled. But let’s do it anyway. We’re going to keep doing it. So Philippians chapter 4:4-7 is Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians to have no anxiety about anything and how to secure the gift of the peace that passes understanding. So let’s read what he has to say — Philippians 4:4 says this:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety 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 passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.¹

Beautiful, beautiful passage... one of the most poetic, in my opinion, it’s one of the most beautiful passages in all of Paul’s letters — barring 1 Corinthians 13. This is just a stunning text. So why does the Church choose this for Advent? And what is Paul saying in this text?

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Well, first question first. The reason the Church picks this passage for Advent is because of what Paul says there in verse 5:

The Lord is at hand.

So here's another example that you'll find scattered throughout Paul's letters, of the fact that when Paul makes moral or spiritual exhortations to his audiences, to his churches that he's founded, he frequently couches them in eschatological terms. They're eschatological motivations.

So one of the reasons he wants his congregation in Philippi to have joy is because Christ is coming, because the Lord is at hand, because He is going to return. So as the Church prepares us to celebrate the first advent of Christ in the nativity, in the feast of Christmas, She also simultaneously wants to prepare us for the second advent of Christ at the end of time, at the final judgment. And so She picks passages from the writings of Paul that are focused on the final advent, on the second advent. So that's the reason for her choosing it.

Now with that in mind, what is Paul saying here to the Philippians? And what, through them, can he say to us today? So the first thing is he's simply commanding them to have joy and to express it through rejoicing. So that's the first point. This is an imperative. He's not just encouraging them or saying, "Hey, it works for me. Here's a little advice: Rejoice in the Lord as often as you can."

No, no, no. He commands them: Rejoice in the Lord, and don't just rejoice, but how often are you supposed to rejoice? Always. So it's a perpetual state of joy. That's what he's commanding the people of Philippi to do. If you have any doubts about it, he repeats it. So he says:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4:4)

So the first thing is the exhortation to joy. The second thing here is the reason for joy. Why should I be joyful? Why should I rejoice in the Lord always? The reason is this: the Lord is at hand.

Now, I don't know about you, but at least in my life growing up as a Christian, I don't recall encountering very often the idea that the *parousia* of Christ — that the second coming of Christ, that the final advent — was something to get really excited or joyful about. A lot of times people approach it with a certain amount of trepidation, a certain amount of fear.

But Paul rightly is telling the Philippians, “Look, because Christ is coming, we have no reason for sadness. We have no reason for fear.” Whatever might be going on in the world today is going to be made right on the day of the Lord. Whatever may be broken in this broken world is going to be restored on the day of Jesus Christ. Whatever may be scarred, whatever pain there might be, whatever evil there might be in the world today — and there's much evil in the world today — is going to be conquered by Jesus at His final advent.

So when you realize that, if those things are true at all, then our response to the reality of the expectation of the day of the Lord being at hand should be joy. It should be joy. It should be rejoicing.

Now, Paul knows, because he's a pastor... he knows that the reality is, though, that in this world — we're still living in this world. We're not in the new creation yet, and in this world, we're beset by anxiety. It's natural in the fallen human state to become anxious about all of the evil and all of the brokenness and all of the sin and suffering in our world and in ourselves.

So he also exhorts the Philippians not only to rejoice because the Lord is at hand, but to have no anxiety... to have no anxiety. And once again, he's categorical in this. He doesn't say, “Try not to have anxiety about small stuff.” You know how people say today, “Don't sweat the small stuff.” That's not what Paul says. He says have no anxiety about anything. He doesn't think it's sufficient merely to not sweat the small stuff but to be really worried about the big ones, the big issues, the big deals. No, no, no. He says:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
(Philippians 4:6)

Okay, so what does Paul mean here? When he says have no anxiety or don't be anxious about anything, what does he mean by the word anxious, and is that even possible? The two questions that would immediately come to my mind.

Okay, so in order to answer the first one, when Paul says "have no anxiety", the Greek word here is *merimnaō*. It's an imperative — he's commanding it. It's like "thou shalt not be anxious". Think of it that way. It's an imperative; it's not just a suggestion. And he's saying not to have it about anything. Now this Greek word *merimnaō* is closely related to the verb for "to remember". So when a person is anxious about something, it keeps coming to their mind. They remember it.

For example, they think about it a lot. So you can see in Matthew 6, for example, Jesus uses the same word in the Sermon on the Mount in His famous exhortation to the disciples not to be anxious. So if you go back to Matthew 6 for a second, Jesus says:

"Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious...

...*merimnaō*...

... about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious...

Same term, *merimnaō*...

... can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious...

There it is again...

... about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious...

Same word, *merimnaō*...

... saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

“Therefore...

Final time:

... do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day. (Matthew 6:25-34)

So I know that was a long passage, but I just want to emphasize for you, where does Paul get the idea that he can command the Philippians to have no anxiety about anything? Not just to not sweat the small stuff, but to not sweat the small stuff or the big stuff? Where is he getting that from? It’s the teaching of Christ.

Now he doesn’t quote Jesus. He doesn’t quote the Sermon on the Mount, but he’s teaching the same thing to his disciples at Philippi that Jesus taught to the apostles in the Sermon on the Mount — the command to be free from anxiety about anything, even the most basic necessities of life (food, clothing, and shelter).

Now, why does Jesus say that the disciples shouldn’t be anxious about that? Well, because if they are anxious, He says it’s a revelation of the fact that they are men of little faith. They don’t actually trust God to provide for them. So anxiety, according to Jesus, is rooted in a lack of trust — a lack of trust in God as our heavenly Father to provide for us.

Paul, if you go back to Philippians, is speaking to the Philippians about not having anxiety, and he goes a little further than Jesus. He doesn't just tell them not to have any, he also gives them a very important practice — a very important piece of advice on how to overcome anxiety. And this is where this passage is particularly powerful for me personally. I just think it's really, very, very inspired and inspiring. So when Paul says in verse 6 of Philippians, "have no anxiety about anything", he doesn't just give them a negative command. He also gives them a positive, something to do:

...in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

So according to Paul, what is the antidote to anxiety? It's in every situation, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, to let your requests be made known to God. So do you need food? Do you need clothing? Do you need shelter? Absolutely. Pray to God about it. Supplicate God and ask Him for it. But even in the midst of deprivation, always make prayer with thanksgiving. In other words, the antidote to anxiety is gratitude and prayer. That's two antidotes, but they go together — a grateful prayer.

I bring that up because it's very fascinating to note that the word thanksgiving here is *eucharistia*. So Eucharistic prayer is the answer to anxiety. Bringing everything we struggle with, everything we deal with, all the vicissitudes and difficulties of this life... bringing them to God in prayer through *eucharistia* — that is the antidote to a life of anxiety.

And as I mentioned earlier, the word anxiety is very similar to the word for "remember". *Merimnaō* is the verb anxiety, and the reason for that is that we tend to be anxious about the things that we think about frequently. So if you want a little test for this, ask yourself, what are you always thinking about? What does your mind tend to, so to speak, loop around? What does it tend to go to?

Another test is, what's the first thing that you think about when you wake up in the morning? That will often reveal to you where your heart is and what you're most

attached to, but also, if you wake up with worry, that's a revelation of what you're anxious about.

For example — one more example from the Gospels. Jesus uses the exact same verb in the story of Mary and Martha. So Martha is trying to get everything ready to serve Jesus, and Jesus says to her:

“Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful.

So as St. Therese and other commentators, Gregory the Great, have pointed out, Jesus doesn't rebuke Martha for serving. He rebukes her for being anxious. Because her mind is troubled and distracted by all of these things that she has to do, so that she's focused on them and she's taking her focus away from Christ. Listening to Jesus is the one thing necessary. And if those other duties distract her and pull her mind and heart away from Christ, then they become a problem. They become, so to speak, an obstacle.

I have more about that in my book, *Introduction to the Spiritual Life*. I've got a section on Martha and Mary and Jesus— on that whole passage. For now, though, I just think it's fascinating and important that Paul, in this passage here, is saying that the antidote to having anxiety is not just to pray but to pray with gratitude... to pray with gratitude — to ask Christ, to ask the Lord and make our supplications known to God, but to do it with *eucharistia*. And if I might extrapolate from that, although it's not clear that Paul here is using *eucharistia* with a specific reference to the Lord's Supper, he seems to be using it in a general way to refer to thanksgiving — although he could be connoting, it's just not clear. There's no clue to make you think that's the primary meaning of the text year.

At the same time, this is what living a liturgical life is all about. One of the things that we do in the Liturgy of the Eucharist is bring our anxieties, our difficulties, our sufferings, the works and the prayers and the joys of our life — we bring it to the *Eucharistia* and then we offer it up in union with the offering of Christ on the altar. This is why the priest says, “Pray brethren, that my sacrifice and yours be made acceptable to God the Father almighty”.

So just in support of that, there's a passage in the *Catechism* on the section on the Eucharist that says this. It's in the section talking about the fact that the Eucharist isn't just a sacrifice of Christ; it's also the sacrifice of the Church. And it says this:

The Eucharist is also the sacrifice of the Church. The Church which is the Body of Christ participates in the offering of her Head. With him, she herself is offered whole and entire. She unites herself to his intercession with the Father for all men. In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body.

And here's the key line:

The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer, and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value.²

So according to the *Catechism*, according to the Church, in the Eucharist we're supposed to be bringing our prayers, our works, our joys and sufferings and uniting them with the *Eucharistia*, with the Eucharistic prayer of the priest who's making the offering in the person of Christ. So I think that it's fascinating on more of a spiritual sense of the text of Philippians here, that when Paul says:

Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with [*eucharistia*] let your requests be made known to God.

He's anticipating the theology of the Eucharist that the Church invites us to as the lay faithful to offer our prayers, works, joys, and sufferings with gratitude. That's what we're doing. We're going to thank God for all that He's done and also make known our needs. And when we do this, according to St. Paul:

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1368

So that supernatural peace — how do we get that? That’s what everybody wants. I want it. According to Paul, how do we do that? How do we achieve that? It’s through this Eucharistic prayer. It’s through having gratitude and thanksgiving in everything, in no matter what the situation might be. We respond to it with prayer and with thanksgiving.

Alright, in closing, there’s a great quote from — well, two great quotes from two great saints. One of them is St. John Chrysostom, who I’ve mentioned many times before on videos, because he wrote commentaries — or homilies, actually — on all of the letters of St. Paul. And the other is from St. Teresa of Avila, one of my all-time favorite Carmelite saints, a Doctor of the Church. And both of them speak to what Paul says here about anxiety and gratitude, although indirectly and in two different ways. So first, St. John Chrysostom, in closing — he addresses this question of what is this peace that passes understanding? How do we get it? This is what he says:

It is comforting to know that the Lord is at hand... *Here is a medicine to relieve grief and every bad circumstance and every pain. What is it? To pray and to give thanks in everything.* He does not wish that a prayer be merely a petition but a thanksgiving for what we have received.... How can one make petitions for the future without a thankful acknowledgement of past things?... *So one ought to give thanks for everything, even what seems grievous.* That is the mark of one who is truly thankful.³

John Chrysostom, *Homily on Philipians* 15.4,4-7. Man, that is powerful. What Chrysostom is saying is, if you want to experience the peace that passes understanding, develop the habit not just of being thankful for the good things, but being thankful for everything, even that which is grievous... even that which causes suffering.

When we can give thanks to God for everything, even those things that are painful, even those things that seem grievous, he says this is the mark of one who is truly thankful. Because what we’re doing is abandoning ourselves to God’s providence,

³ John Chrysostom, *Homily on Philipians* 15.4.4-7; trans. Mark J. Edwards

putting absolute and complete trust in Him that He will bring good even out of the greatest evil and that the word of Paul in Romans 8 is true:

We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

So beautiful passage there — challenging but beautiful passage from St. John Chrysostom.

Here is a medicine to relieve grief and every bad circumstance and every pain.

... is to remember that Christ is at hand (which is what we're doing in Advent, it's why it's so joyful a season), but also to pray and give thanks in everything. And as a kind of — this isn't a commentary on this, but as a wonderful prayer you might remember or poem you might remember, St. Teresa of Avila wrote about this kind of abandonment to Divine Providence in a beautiful poem where she said this. She writes:

Let nothing trouble you / Let nothing frighten you / Everything passes / God never changes / Patience/ Obtains all / Whoever has God / Wants for nothing / God alone is enough.⁴

For our purposes here, the line of that that jumps out at me is when she says “Everything passes”. See, the reason that the *parousia* of Christ, that the final advent of Jesus is a cause for joy, is because on that final day, on that last day, as the book of Revelation says — whatever pain, whatever suffering, whatever sin, whatever evil there might be in this world, Christ is going to make all things new. And that is a reason for joy, and that is a reason for thanksgiving.

⁴ St. Teresa of Jesus, *Poesías* 30, in CCC 227