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Philippians 4:4-7
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FAITH WITHOUT ANSWERS

We arrive at the third Sunday in Advent as the shadows draw down upon us. Everything becomes, by increments, more and more paradoxical. We are supposed to listen for the sound of angels, but mostly what we hear are the sounds of frantic shoppers, and people driving badly. The season of buying and selling speeds up, indeed it becomes frenzied — just as the church's most sacred story invites us to slow down, turn away from the world, and experience joy in a way that makes no sense at all.

This is all a paradox because it is the church that gave Christmas to the world, and then the world that warped it beyond recognition. The Christmas story is as counter-cultural as it gets, a scandalous teenage pregnancy, a pair of peasant aliens on the run, nobody has any money, and there's no room in the inn. Then, as now, raw power runs the world; money is power; and poor women still give birth to poor children who cry unnoticed in the darkness and in the cold.

Why should Rome care? Indeed, at the time it couldn't care less. Jesus was born in oblivion, and his story was written long after he was gone. But only because as that child grew he came to challenge the empire and everything we are supposed to believe about being happy, about knowing our place and staying in it, about how God distributes love and justice.

If he had just tried to lead another rebellion, like so many others, he could have been snuffed out on the battlefield. But because he led a revolution of the heart and soul, he had to be executed as an example of what happens to those who do not play by the rules, and do not bow down to their protectors.

That's why it seems so odd in 2009, living in our own empire and still addicted to war, that we encourage pastors and congregations to read from the ancient letter of Paul to the Philippians. This small tract may be my favorite of all the letters, because it captures the paradox of being Christian in a Roman world so well. It contains the ancient hymn in chapter 2, which may be the oldest scrap of early Christian liturgy we have, whose crescendo is the joy of that first beloved community . . . "so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

That was the only creed in the early church, if you could call it a creed at all. It's really just a confession of joy in what those first converts, mostly poor and lost souls on the fringes of society in the shadows of a brutal empire, was the essential truth they lived by —Jesus is Lord; Caesar is not. Let the New World order begin, and let it begin with me.

Paul writes this letter from prison, and this congregation in the city of Philippi, a Roman colony in the province of Macedonia, is made up mostly of Gentiles who know that the great missionary apostle has been arrested and is behind bars for preaching the gospel. Paul apparently was in and out of jail a lot, and on several occasions boasts that his imprisonment will only help the young church to grow. The congregation has been praying for his release, and sends one of their own, Epaphroditus, with gifts to supply Paul's needs (who knew what, some food perhaps, something to write on, some clothing, maybe even a cake with a file in it?) But upon delivering those gifts, Epaphroditus becomes seriously ill, and when he recovers, Paul sends him back, bearing a letter we know today as Philippians. As always, all these centuries later, we are reading someone else's mail.

They are love letters, really, and they give us a glimpse into the strangely joyful people who first followed Jesus and who seemed to believe, against all odds, that they were starting the world over again. They acted as if everything would turn out all right, if not for them personally, then for the movement that their Lord had given birth to. As far as I can tell, they had no rational reason to be joyful, and yet in this brief letter the idea that we should be "joyful," that we should rejoice and be glad appears sixteen times. The word joy itself five times, and the verbs "rejoice" and "be glad" appear eleven times.

The only warning Paul has in the letter is for those in the congregation who are worried about the wrong things, or those that have failed to distinguish things that truly matter from things that do not. This may be a pastor's most important job, although it isn't talked about much in seminary. In case you haven't noticed, churches split over whether to use one communion cup or

many, whether dancing is more fun than sinful or more sinful than fun, and in some cases, whether the youth group should be allowed to eat pizza in the parlor.

At Philippi, there are people Paul calls “dogs,” “evil workers,” and “enemies” of the cross of Christ because they espouse righteousness based on the law, especially when it comes to circumcision. Ah yes, circumcision — that’s another difficult thing for us to get our minds around, although men certainly relate to it better than women do. The great foreskin debate that almost destroyed the church before it even got started — how could this have been such a big deal?

Well, if you had been raised to believe that only circumcised males are acceptable to God then it’s hard to give it up. If you bear the mark of the covenant, and others obviously do not, it’s one more form of tribal prejudice. That’s how you look at it if you are one of the chosen. If you were one of the uncircumcised, if you were a Gentile, and you were considering becoming a Christian, there was this rather painful problem to consider, assuming that as an adult you would have to have surgery performed on such a precious part of your body, and then, lo and behold, you find out (Thank you Jesus), that Paul and others have prevailed in their battle against those who would require it to become a Christian. Talk about feeling joyful!

Brandon Scott, who teaches New Testament at Phillips, said you’ve got to hand it to Paul and the early apostles. This was a church growth strategy that really worked! We have nothing to compare to it today, Brandon said, enjoying his penchant for earthiness – nothing that would be as effective at convincing men to join the church as effective as telling them that first they do not have to cut off their end of their penis!

There’s been a long-running joke at Mayflower that when you join, you get a free toaster, but it’s not quite the same.

Seriously, if you read this letter aloud, you will be struck by how odd it is that these people who have so little to be thankful for are called to be joyful anyway. I am reminded of this every time we go to Nicaragua. There seems to be more joy among those who have little or nothing, than among those who possessions are great.

Listen to Paul exhorting this tiny band of Jesus-followers surrounded by Roman legions who could crush them just for sport: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

Did you hear that? Let your gentleness be known to everyone. That's how you recognize a member of the beloved community. She is joyful and she is gentle. It's not a list of things she believes about the Trinity, the Blood Atonement, or the Second Coming. A Christian is gentle and joyful, and lives as a luminous paradox in a world that is often neither — that is violent and cynical.

If you want to sharpen this idea by comparison, consider that Sarah Pallin is considered by millions to be the epitome of a Christian woman, at least by those who stand in line for hours to read a book she didn't write. "Going Rogue?" You've got to be kidding me. That title assumes a departure from the norm, a reckless, self-possessed deviation from politics as usual and the road less traveled. She doesn't march to the beat of a different drummer; it's the same old empty-headed celebrity culture that has nearly ruined our democracy.

The Christians at Philippi, on the other hand, could claim to be going rogue, but they wouldn't see it that way. They wouldn't describe themselves as fighters, misunderstood patriots, or pit bulls with lipstick — they were subversive in their gentleness and their joyfulness. And they knew perfectly well that at any moment, Roman legions could knock at the door and make them disappear forever.

Listen, "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. And the peace that passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Do not worry about anything? How is that possible? There is always something to worry about. In those days, many of these same people lived on the edge of starvation. Diseases for which there was no cure ravaged whole communities, most children died before the age of five, and women often died in childbirth. There were no social services, no hospitals, no way of caring for the sick and the insane or the orphans or the widows, and so they littered the landscape with their desperate faces and pierced the night with their howling and begging. And Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always." Do not worry about anything?

What about Iran? What about Afghanistan? What about so many people without jobs? What about our own mortality in a death-denying culture? What about growing old in a youth culture? What about not having enough money for retirement? What about our deepest fears that those we love will stop loving us, or that in the end we are just dust in the wind? That life is an absurd dream from which we wake by dying, and nothing really matters?

Show me something to be joyful about and I'll consider it. Show me a reason to be gentle, especially given the way people are driving out there, and I'll think about it. "The Lord is near"? Really. How near? Maybe you could show me his face? I want answers. I want evidence. I want the peace that passes all understanding in the form of an irresistible argument.

I need to know that I am not wasting my time in church, or by listening to music, or rocking a baby, or holding my beloved, because I have that elusive thing called the gift of faith. I want to be joyful now, not later, when things work out and I am no longer afraid. I want to be gentle now, not later, after people have been gentle to me.

Several years ago, a prominent surgeon in this town was diagnosed with an aggressive form of brain cancer. He called me to his home and said, "Robin, I want the gift of faith. How do I get it? I have been able to get everything else in my life, but not this. If it's a gift, I can't get it by myself, and if I can't get it by myself, who gives it to me? Can you give it to me?"

His disease only made urgent what most of us can more easily put off. What does it mean to have faith without answers? What does it mean to possess joy and live gently when there are so many reasons to be filled with hatred and to push and shove with the best of them? Don't we know that nice guys finish last and that no good deed goes unpunished?

Don't we know that in the end we will all die, and that everything we love we will lose? What is there to rejoice about? The Lord is near? So is disappointment and heartache. So is bankruptcy, so are my adult children who have moved back in with me. Do not worry about anything? Have you watched the news lately?

More homeless, more hungry, more desperate families than at any time since the Great Depression. And yet, compared to the rest of the world, we are still swimming in abundance. And faith must be about more than winking at God when times are good. The true test of joyfulness and gentleness is when things are bad, and the world is full of woe. Because when has that not been the case?

Like many of you, we performed an annual Christmas ritual at our house last night by watching "It's a Wonderful Life," starring Jimmy Stewart. You know how it ends, but you watch it anyway, because there is a yearning deep in all of us to know what difference we have made, and in truth we would be astonished to know how much we have affected the lives of other people.

At 363 yesterday, we modeled both gentleness and joyfulness. At the end of the day, Shawn got a coat she had saved for one particular family, a woman with three children and the father in jail for unpaid parking tickets. They live right across the street from the shelter, and she introduced them to Jack Shrader, who on impulse, took them shopping for Christmas presents for all the kids. “Walmart is the last place I wanted to go at this time of the year, he joked, but it was joyful.”

The church has no more important role to play in our time than to model gentleness and to be possessed by joy against the odds. We are mistaken if we think that what we believe will make any real difference in the world. But what we do, and how we carry ourselves, and whether we carve out an alternative way of being in the world for the sake of peace, that makes a big difference — a much bigger difference than we think.

There is no time like the present to be joyful. There is no time like the present to be gentle. There is no time like the present not to worry. And, if someone wants to know why you are acting so strangely, tell them that you have considered the alternative. Tell them that you’ve seen business as usual and that’s not the way you want to do business. Tell them that you’ve seen plenty of the grumpy and cynical and selfish, and decided there must be a better way. Talk about going rogue.

Listen to how Paul concludes by giving the congregation at Philippi its *modus operandi*, its way of being in the meantime: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

That’s the gift of faith. That’s the paradox of Advent. And this is the Miracle on 63rd Street.

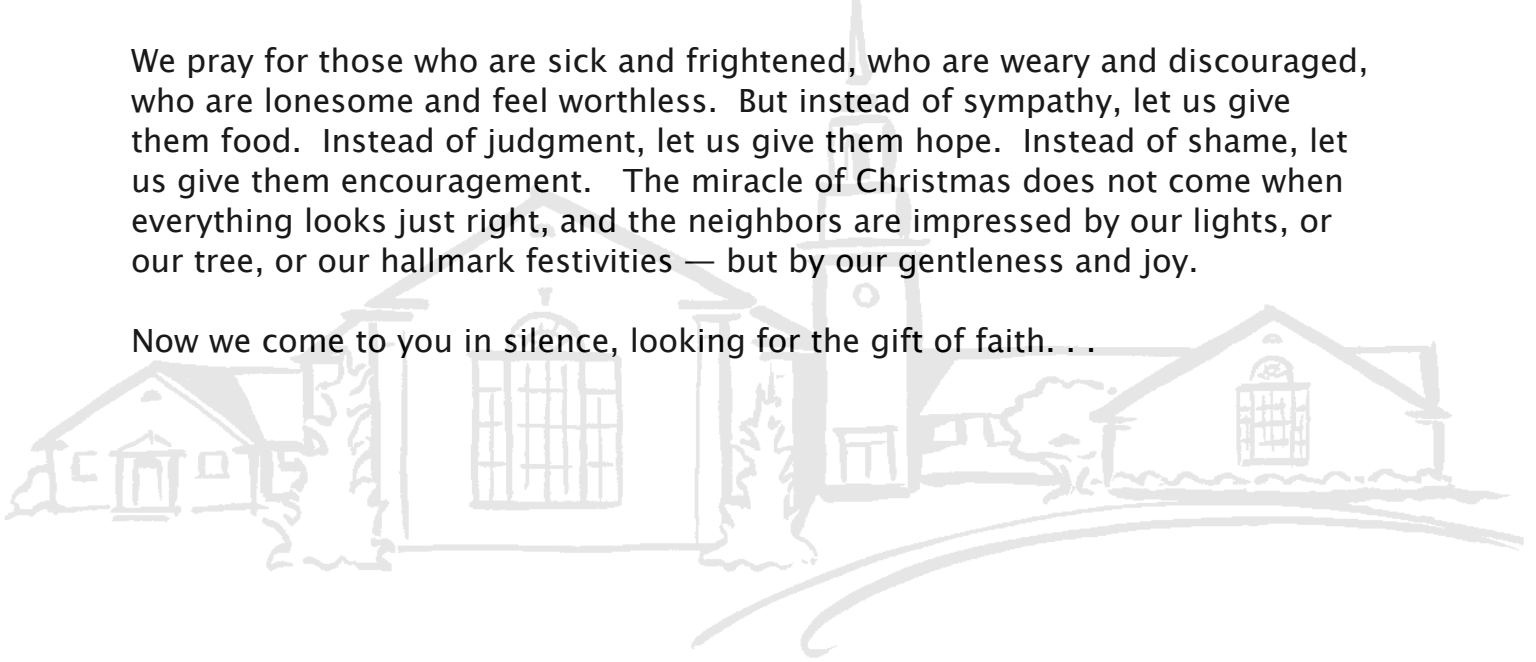
Amen.

Pastoral Prayer for Sunday, December 13, 2009

Lord of Life, slow us down. Help us to turn off the noise-makers, unplug ourselves from the gadgets, stand down from the compulsions to do rather than to be — and let joy find us. Let gentleness overtake us. Let peace be the gift of the season. There are plenty of things to worry about, and much injustice in a world of selfishness and apathy and cruelty. But we are not called to condemn, but to reconstitute. We are not called to join in the madness but to step out of it. We are not called to push and shove but to move our hearts and souls to the side of road, where the stranger needs help.

We pray for those who are sick and frightened, who are weary and discouraged, who are lonesome and feel worthless. But instead of sympathy, let us give them food. Instead of judgment, let us give them hope. Instead of shame, let us give them encouragement. The miracle of Christmas does not come when everything looks just right, and the neighbors are impressed by our lights, or our tree, or our hallmark festivities — but by our gentleness and joy.

Now we come to you in silence, looking for the gift of faith. . .



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