

December 13, 2009

Scripture: Philippians 4: 4-9

Sermon: "The Tinsel that Ties us Together"

We are continuing our Advent journey and we find ourselves in a very odd situation. We are in the middle. We're not at the beginning and we are not at the end. We are at the place where we are so close to stable and manger that we can almost make out the figures. We are so close that we are sneaking in a Christmas carol or two this week. We are so close...yet still so far.

we have lit the candle of hope. We have lit the candle of peace. And today, we lit the candle of ...joy? It seems like an odd candle to light today. Joy? We are in the middle, not at the beginning and not at the end. Joy seems more appropriate next week when we celebrate Christmas Sunday, when we pull out all the stops, when we are only 4 days away from Christmas. Today, joy? Really?

I have always struggled with this. In all honesty, I have often thought that I would like to go back in time and tell the church fathers that they got things all wrong...on lots of different issues but especially this one. Joy on the third week of Advent? Talk about giving a preacher a hard job! For the whole Advent journey, preachers from all over have been talking about preparing for the Lord, hoping for the day with all things will be made right, and slowing down, enjoying the peace of the season and here the church fathers go, jumping in with two feet, celebrating the joy of the season. And now it seems like we skipped ahead two steps: Joy?

And I am sure that in the course of our fascinating conversation, these church fathers would invite me to take another look at this text from Philippians and would invite me to take another look at my understanding of joy once more. The joy that Paul talks about in this text is not the joy that goes along with happiness or that goes along even with contentment.

This type of joy finds its meaning in the understanding that we worship a God who was in the beginning, who continues to be with us now, and will continue to be with us in the future. This joy that we celebrate today finds its foundation in the understanding that our God holds to God's promises, that we live our lives out through God's abundance and that we can trust in the Lord always. This joy that Paul talks about in this text is a joy that is a result, a side-effect that springs from the gratitude that we have to our God as God's people.

This joy when looked at through the eyes of faith becomes what binds us together and connects us as God's people.

In our Scripture today, we have a letter from the apostle Paul to the community at Philippi, a community that is facing struggles internally as well as externally. This community is struggling to find its voice as people of God and struggling to find its mission, its purpose as a community of faith.

So Paul writes them this letter. And we imagine that Paul is sitting at his desk, in a nice clean room, pulling out his nice crisp stationary with his initials done on top in calligraphy. We imagine that Paul is deep in thought, tapping his pen to his chin, and then when the Spirit moves him, he will begin to write.

We certainly don't imagine the true circumstances or environment in which Paul really sits down to write this letter. Because when Paul sits down to write this letter, he is in prison. Paul has been beaten, flogged and thrown into a cell, knowing that he will go to trial, be found guilty and be put to death as his punishment.

And as readers, we are surprised that when he picks up his pen to write, Paul's body is broken and bruised, he writes these words: "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice". Shouldn't he be angry? As readers, we are surprised that when he picks up his pen to write, his options for release from prison are down to none, he writes, "The Lord is near". Shouldn't he be telling God enough is enough? As readers, we are surprised that when he picks up his pen to write, his faith is secure in the Lord, he writes, "Keep doing the things that you have learned and received and heard, and the God of peace will be with you." Shouldn't he be saying that God failed him and deserted him?

As readers, we want to say to Paul-How can you be so joyous in your situation? How can you write about the Lord being near when it seems like God has abandoned you? How can you write words of hope, words of peace, words of joy when none of these things can be found in your situation? As readers, we want to say, Paul be realistic. How can you be so joyous in the face of such darkness and depression?

And Paul's response to our questions and to the struggles at Philippi is this letter in which he states his core belief as a person of faith: Hold to the promises of God. God has acted in the past and God will act again. God has not abandoned us. God gave us a gift-a gift of life blessed by the promises of God, a life that finds joy, not in material things but in God's grace and God's goodness. Our God is good. Our God is near. Through this letter, Paul invites us as people of faith to look at his situation through eyes of faith, through eyes that have observed God's abundance, through eyes that have witnessed the Kingdom of God at work and truly see the joy that fills their lives because God claims them and names them. They have been given a joy that can never be diminished or destroyed.

Paul also wants them to understand that the minute they give up on grace, give up on hope, give up on joy, then that is the moment that they are the most alone because they gave up on God. They stopped the conversation. They built up walls and shut God out. They broke the tie that binds us all together: The love of God and the joy that flows from knowing that we are God's very own.

When Paul sits down to write this letter, he wants to remind this struggling community that they have been called as God's very own, that they are called to live out lives that reflect the principles of the Kingdom of God: lives that are just, lives that are commendable, lives that are honorable, lives that reflect things worthy of praise such as love, peace, hope, grace and yes, gratitude.

Paul wants this community to understand that by "filling one's mind [and heart] with what Paul sees as the signs of life, not so that [they] will feel good, but because this is another way of filling oneself with God's life and so allowing God's life to flow through us to the world around us" and spread the Kingdom of God.

He reminds this struggling community to look at their lives, their seemingly dire situation through eyes of faith and know that the Lord is near, know that they can trust in the promises of the Lord and know that “joy and gratitude” are the fitting responses to the marvelous, mysterious, goodness of life that God has blessed us with as God’s children.”

Paul wants this community to understand that when he calls them to rejoice, it is not a fake, plastic happiness that fades with time or that can be shattered by the powers that be of this world. When he calls them to rejoice, he wants them to understand that this joy will sustain them, that this joy is a celebration of what God has done in the past, what God is doing now, and what God will do in the future. Paul wants this struggling community to embrace the promises of God and live out God’s abundance in this world in joy and in gratitude because these are “defining characteristics of the Christian life.”

Paul wants this struggling community and us to sing with joy because we are free, because God is watching over us, because God holds us in the palm of God’s hand. He wants us to understand that this joy does not insure a stress free life or a life without strife. What this promise of joy does insure is that we are not alone. God is with us. Emmanuel. God with us once more.

This world may look at their joy and think we are crazy. How can we be joyous in the face of violence, in the face of hatred, in the face of darkness? And the answer is that we are looking at our world, our situation through eyes of faith, through eyes that have observed God’s abundance in our lives, through eyes that have witnessed the power, the might, the glorious and wondrous Kingdom of God!

And Paul encourages this struggling community at Philippi and encourages us today as people of faith to know, truly know and accept that we are held in the palm of God’s hand and that our Lord is near.

And celebrate! Celebrate because we worship a God who knows no end. Celebrate and sing for joy because our God is faithful. Celebrate and sing for joy because our God who created the universe also formed, shaped and cares for you and me. Celebrate and sing for joy because we are connected as a community of faith that supports one another, loves one another, suffers with one another, and hopes with one another and sings with joy with one another.

So maybe those crazy church fathers did get it right because on this third Sunday, when we are so close, we need a reminder that we celebrate and sing for joy, not just on one day but throughout all our days as people of faith. On this third Sunday of Advent, when we are so close, yet so far, when the Lord is so near but we still don’t know the time and place of his arrival, we need a reminder to look at our situation, our lives through eyes of faith that have witnessed the power and the grace of the Kingdom of God at work. Maybe those crazy church father did get it right because when we have come so far, and still have so far to go, we need a reminder that we are surrounded and supported by a community of faith that strive to live out lives of justice, lives of peace, lives of hope, and yes, lives of joy.

We need a reminder that during this Advent season, we celebrate and remember that on that night two thousand years ago that a King was born in a manger. We need a reminder that we celebrate because man taught and preached about God's Kingdom. We remember and celebrate because a man gave sight to the blind, who gave hearing to the deaf, who made the lame walk, who gave people new life. During the season of Advent, we remember and celebrate because a man died on a cross on that Friday morning all those many years ago, who was in the tomb for three days, and on that Easter morning, rose from the dead to give us new life.

Maybe those crazy church fathers did get it right. Because they understood that at this point in our journey, we would need encouragement. We would need joy. So we hear again today a simple beautiful message that reminds us of our purpose as people of faith and gives us our voice as the people of God!

Sing for Joy!! Because you are God's own! Sing for joy because our God has acted in the past. Sing for joy because our God will act in our lives again! Sing for joy!

God will come. You are so close to that manger in Bethlehem. Don't quit. Just a few more steps. Hold firm to God's promises of hope and salvation.

Be the people of God, actively working, joyously celebrating the coming of God's Kingdom. Sing for Joy. Strengthen the weak. Share the Good News! Take the Welcome of God's hospitality out into the world and invite all of God's children to the table.

Sing for joy and know that the Lord is near!

May we celebrate the joy that binds us together as the people of God. Amen.

Heather McColl
Midway Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)