



Sermon for Fourth Sunday in Advent Philippians 4:4-7

Fr. William Klock

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All through Advent the lessons have been reminding us that we need to prepare. But prepare for what? Christmas is the celebration of the First Advent of Christ at his birth, but that happened almost two thousand years ago. There's no way we can prepare for that—it's already happened. No, Advent is the yearly reminder that as Christians we need to be prepared, we need to be in a constant and growing state of readiness, for the Second Advent when Jesus returns to judge the living and the dead. At his First Advent, *for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven...was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.* All of us who have trusted in Jesus' atoning death and submitted to him as our Lord, we're now living in the kingdom he established. But our tendency—and this why we need Advent—our tendency is to become spiritually lazy. It's easy to do, because as we live in his spiritual kingdom, we're surrounded by the very physical kingdom of the world. Our redemption hasn't yet been consummated and so even though we have the Holy Spirit living within us, graciously empowering us to love and good works, we still struggle with the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Often for us, the physical reality of the world overcomes the spiritual reality of the kingdom. After all, we can touch and see and feel the world around us. Even though it's just as real, the kingdom of God is more nebulous and often easy to forget. And so we need this reminder: Be prepared! Be ready for his return. Don't waste the time he's given us here to do the work of his kingdom and to prepare ourselves for his coming.

And we need Christmas too—we need the reminder that Jesus *has* come into the world and that he will finish the work he's started in us. We need the reminder because life here is not easy. Not only do we face the often difficult challenges of growing in the faith and doing the work of

the kingdom, but we continue to live with the consequences of the Fall. There's still sin and pain and death and suffering in the world. And as we seek to follow God, we face the ridicule and persecution of those who reject Christ. But we're reminded today that the darker the night, the more brightly the star of Bethlehem shines! In the midst of the darkness, Paul tells us excitedly in our Epistle:

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

"Rejoice in the Lord *always!*" Not just at Christmas, but at all times. We're a Christmas people; what Jesus has done for us permeates our whole lives every day and in every thing. We rejoice in all things, and that includes all of our troubles or anxieties or persecutions. In fact, our joy should be even more visible when we face tribulations. The prophet Micah wrote, "When I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me" (Micah 7:8). Habakkuk wrote:

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

The book of Acts tells us how the first Christians, facing the persecution of the Jews rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for his name's sake. How did they do it? By worldly standards that kind of joy in the face of suffering just isn't possible. The answer is there in verse 4. St. Paul doesn't just tell us to rejoice. He tells us to rejoice *in the Lord*. Jesus gives us hope, because in his First Advent he gives us something to look forward to at his Second Advent—something on the other side of our suffering. He gives us a new and eternal perspective—something the world doesn't have—and that changes everything. And it really does change *everything*—or at least, it should. It's not just that we rejoice in all things. If we're living a life of joy, it *will* impact every area of our lives. Paul goes on in verse 5:

Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.

The King James says, "Let your moderation be known unto all men."

Other modern translations say to let our "forbearance", "gentleness", or "graciousness" be seen by all. The Greek word is hard to translate, but it's important, because Paul is describing the character that we need to display to the world—this is a key way we witness Christ in our lives. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul describes this character in terms of the *meekness* of Jesus, but it's the kind of meekness that can only be displayed by the almighty God and Judge of the universe. When I see this word in Scripture I'm reminded of a friend I had in university. He was a giant—about 6'8" and probably 350 lbs. of muscle. He was a football player and the sort of guy who could pull your arms off. And yet as powerful as he was, he was very gentle. His girlfriend always said he was a big teddy bear. That's the idea here: great power and authority choosing to display profound gentleness. We have been united with Christ. We bear his power and authority to the world. Paul even tells us that on the last day we will sit with him to judge the world. But instead of lording our status as co-heirs with Christ over the world and over the people around us, instead of getting caught up in the stress and conflict and fighting of the world, instead of looking out for "Number One", we show the same gracious, gentle, meek, and forbearing spirit that Jesus has shown to us. Remember, you and I were God's enemies. You and I were deserving of death. He has every right to destroy us and he has the power to do it instantly, but he has chosen to be gracious and merciful. And as he changes our perspective—as he focuses our eyes on eternity—our hearts should be becoming more gracious and merciful too—more like his heart. Our focus is less and less on this world, and more and more on Jesus, on his kingdom, and on the work of his kingdom. One commentator writes: "Let us be ready to drop all that is ours, so that we may hold fast all that is Christ's; ready to drop earth that we may the better grasp heaven." Think of the old story of the kid crying because his hand is trapped in the cookie jar. His mother tries and tries, but it just won't come out. And that's when she realizes that the reason his hand won't come out is because it's full of cookies. He's trapped in the cookie jar, but he isn't willing to let go of the cookies to get untrapped! As long as your hands are engaged in holding onto the things of the world, you'll never be able to take hold of Christ and the things of heaven. And Paul reminds us why it's so important we have

this perspective: “The Lord is at hand.” He’s coming! Time is short! It’s all about being prepared. Just like everything else we should be doing in life, we’re too often prone to putting off our preparation for Christ’s return. Our time is limited. We need to make the most of it—we need to be witnessing Christ to the world *today*, not putting it off until tomorrow. We need to be maturing in the faith *today*, not putting it off until tomorrow. As St. Peter tells us, “The end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers” (1 Peter 4:7 NKJV). Today, not tomorrow!

And Paul knew why we have such a problem focusing on that preparation. The world distracts us and robs of us of our eternal perspective. We get bogged down in the things of earth—especially so in the cares and worries of day to day life. So he says in verse 6:

Do not be anxious about anything,

He uses the same word that Jesus uses when he tells us in Matthew 6:34 not to worry about tomorrow, but instead to seek first God’s kingdom and his righteousness. We know the final outcome. God has already won the victory and if we are in Christ, we are on his victorious side. But he’s left us here and given us time to share his good news of forgiveness with all those people around us who are still on the side of the world—and we do that in part by showing our trust in him instead of worrying and being anxious about life. We need to realise that anxiety is sinful; at its root is a lack of faith in God’s promises. Anxious people will never grow in the faith, and not only that, but they will have a poor witness to the world! So instead of being anxious Paul says:

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

Here’s where our spiritual rubber meets the road of faith. The way of the world is to be anxious, because it has no hope when life is difficult. Christians, on the other hand, know that we have a God in heaven who has already won the battle for us and who, in the meantime, will take care of our every need if we will only follow him. When life is hard the world gets anxious; the Christian prays and exercises his trust in God and hope in his

promises. The Christian trusts that God is at work in everything, because that’s what he has promised: “For those who love God all things work together for good” (Romans 8:28). Our problem is that we forget what the “good” is. If we keep our eternal perspective, we’ll remember that “good” isn’t whatever is we want, but that “good” is our growing in Christ-likeness and in faith. I like the way Isaac Williams put it: “Trouble does not spring from the ground; there is some object and good purpose for the troubles which are planted so thick like thorns around our dwelling-places on earth. The reason is this: that such may be made subjects and occasions of prayer to God: God would have us at all times looking to Him; our faces always turned, not like the beasts to the ground, but towards Heaven. And if any one wishes to know on any occasion why this or that little matter of trouble occurs to him,—some difficulty perhaps, some regret, some ill treatment, some loss or reproach, or bodily pain,—of this he may be assured, that it comes to him from God, in order to induce him to pray. If we had nothing to trouble us, we should have nothing to desire; and if we had nothing to desire, we should have nothing to pray for. It is prayer which hallows all the lesser concerns and accidents of life.”

Consider that St. Paul had what he called a thorn in his flesh. We don’t know what it was. Some say it was a physical handicap or illness, some that it was some sin that he struggled with, but whatever it was, he prayed repeatedly that God would take it away, because it pained him and because he felt that it interfered with his ministry. But God chose not to take it away, and Paul testifies to us that the thorn in his flesh, through prayer, became an abundant occasion of grace—even to the point that he no longer wanted it gone. In fact this brings us full-circle: Paul learned to *rejoice* in his affliction, because it taught him to trust in God. He could proclaim: “When I am weak, then I am strong!” Not because the thorn made him strong, but because it taught him to lean on and draw from the divine strength of God through his gracious, indwelling Holy Spirit.

Do you have a thorn in your flesh? Is there something in your life that causes you pain, that makes life difficult, that makes for a daily struggle? Something you’ve prayed for God to take away? A situation you’ve prayed for God to

change? And he hasn’t? I’ve learned that too many people seem to become angry with God in those situations. They blame God for the problem or they complain that he isn’t treating them fairly. Brothers and sisters, those thorns in the flesh are our opportunities to lean on God, not to get angry with him. He offers them to us as occasions to experience the abundance of his grace. We far too often jump to the conclusion that God’s will is for everyone to be health and happy and for life here to be easy and comfortable. We forget that God’s ultimate purpose is to make us holy and to prepare us for eternity in his presence. It’s far more important to God that you learn to live in his grace and to trust in him, than that your life be easy or comfortable. And as we can see from the example of Israel in the Old Testament, he often uses difficulties in this life in order to prepare us for life in his kingdom. Again, it’s about our perspective. God wants to give us eternal perspective and to focus our eyes on the things of heaven, but to do that he often has to take away the things of earth—the things we won’t otherwise let go of. Friends, when he does that, it’s not because he likes to see us in pain or because he isn’t fair, it’s because he loves us and is graciously drawing our attention to himself and teaching us to live in him. We’re far too often like the kid with his hand stuck in the cookie jar simply because he won’t let go of the fistful of cookies. God uses the tribulations of life in order to show us that he has better plans for us, if only we would open our hands and drop the cookies.

That’s when our supplications—those prayers for him to deal with the hard things in life—turn into the thanksgivings that Paul mentions in verse 6. When our prayers for relief turn into thanksgiving for the source of our suffering, that’s when we know we’re on the right track; that’s when we know our eyes are focused on heaven and we’re living in the kingdom—that we’re prepared for Jesus’ Second Advent.

The promise that follows if we will truly trust in God is in verse 7:

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

This the peace that Jesus told his disciples about in John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” Let me say two things about the peace of the Lord and how it fits in with this Sunday of preparation. First, the more we learn to experience and live in the peace of the Lord, the better we’ll be prepared for eternity. The peace of the Lord is truly a foretaste of the life of heaven. But as we live out the peace of the Lord, we witness heaven on earth. We display before the anxious and worried eyes of the world what it means to have hope and to have faith and to trust in Jesus. Think about that. We greet each other on Sunday mornings with those words: “The peace of the Lord be with you.” Those are powerful words, but I’m not sure we realise that. It’s not just a churchy way of saying “Hi” or “Good morning.” In fact, it’s not so much a greeting as it is a blessing and an exhibition of our love for our brothers and sisters that we wish for them to experience “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.”

And in the second half of the promise, St. Paul tells us that God’s peace will “guard” our hearts and minds in Christ. That word “guard” is a strong one. In other places it’s used to describe a watchman guarding a city or a fortress from enemies, or a prison guard guarding a prisoner. If we will trust in God—if we will rest secure in Christ—he will keep us *secure* in his peace—a peace that overcomes all the anxieties and worries and fears of the world, that gives us grace to have an eternal perspective in the midst of our trials and tribulations and sufferings.

Brothers and sisters, this is what Christmas is all about—it’s joy in the knowledge that Our Lord and King is with us. But we need to remember that it’s not just a sentimental joy. If that’s all it is, then we’re no better than the people who say a prayer or walk an aisle and treat the Gospel as fire insurance or a “Get Our of Hell Free” card. Advent calls us to prepare; not to prepare for Christmas or for the First Advent—that already happened. No, Advent calls us to prepare because we are a Christmas people—to grow in the new life we find in the manger and at the cross, that we might be prepared for Jesus’ return. Christ is with us. Live

in him and exercise the faith he has given you. Don’t drop the spiritual ball. Let his indwelling Spirit focus your eyes on Jesus—that’s the Spirit’s job—and let him change your perspective. Let him take your eyes off the things of earth and set them on the things of heaven. And realise that even though letting go of things is sometimes hard—even painful—our time here is short. In his gracious love, God is preparing us for something so much better—something so wonderful that we can never fully comprehend it in this life.

Adam and Eve’s sin was in taking God’s role on themselves. Instead of trusting that he knew what was best for them, they decided to make that call for themselves. Brothers and sisters, that’s something God didn’t design us to do. Our understanding, our knowledge, and our perspective are limited. Too often, though, we continue to live like Adam and Eve. We still fail to trust that God knows what’s best for us. We’re convinced that there’s nothing better than the cookies clenched tightly in our fist. We can’t imagine anything better. We refuse to listen as God gently urges us to let go. We refuse to trust that he’s got something better for us. God will do whatever it takes to get us to let go. Don’t live your life with your hand stuck in the world’s cookie jar! Don’t be like Israel. God eventually had to take literally everything away from his people, sending them into exile, to get their attention and to teach them to trust him. Even then, when Jesus came, most of them refused to let go of the law in order to take hold of his grace.

The sooner we learn to let go of the things of earth, the sooner God will place the things of heaven in our hands. And the more often we trust and obey—the better we learn that lesson—the more we will find ourselves rejoicing with St. Paul as we grow and flourish in the grace of God, singing, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” This is why we pray today, “Lord, come among us, we pray, with your power and help us with your great might so that, although we are hindered by our sins and wickedness from running the race set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us through the work of your Son our Lord to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be honour and glory now and for ever. Amen.”