

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Third Sunday of Advent

December 13, 2020

Psalm 126:1–6 (ESV):

1 When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

2 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then they said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

3 The LORD has done great things for us;
we are glad.

4 Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like streams in the Negeb!

5 Those who sow in tears
shall reap with shouts of joy!

6 He who goes out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
bringing his sheaves with him.

First Reading: Isaiah 61:1–4; 8–11 (ESV):

The Year of the Lord’s Favor

61 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
3 to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Isaiah 61:8–11 (ESV):

8 For I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
9 Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge them,
that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed.

10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations.

EPISTLE: 1 Thessalonians 5:16–24 (ESV):

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise prophecies, 21 but test everything; hold fast what is good. 22 Abstain from every form of evil.

23 Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.

THE GOSPEL - John 1:6–8; John 1:19–28 (ESV):

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

John 1:19–28 (ESV):

The Testimony of John the Baptist

19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” 20 He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” 21 And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” 22 So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” 23 He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.”

24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) 25 They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?” 26 John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, 27 even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.” 28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

Sermon 48 – Third Sunday of Advent

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Fellow Redeemed,

Our Epistle lesson today is from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, and in this section is one of Paul's extended goodbyes. Paul wraps up the thrust of

what he wants the Christians in Thessalonica to know, and leaves them with a few words. Each of Paul's letters have a flavor to them, a focus that Paul had in writing to the congregation. It usually revolved around whatever the occasion for Paul's writing was. There was no postal service back in these days, so letter writing was kind of a big deal, because someone Paul knew had to personally deliver the letter to the congregation. Paul doesn't go through this unless he has a reason.

The reason for Paul writing to the Thessalonians gives the letter its flavor. Paul writes to these guys because there were some misunderstandings in their congregation about the end times, Jesus' return, persecution, and what happens to the dead. These are important issues, Paul knows this, so he takes the time to write to them, including his "usual" instructions to live decent Christian lives and so forth.

So Paul has told these folks what happens to the dead, reminded them that their mourning is temporary, he's told them that someday Christ will come back, don't know when, and he's told them that until Christ comes back their job is to live like little Christs, little Jesuses, and to hold onto the faith that he passed on. Paul summarizes this pretty nicely in the Epistle for today. **"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."** Bold words. Rejoicing and giving thanks in all circumstances does not come naturally to sinners like you and I. When the chips are down, I'm more apt to mope and get mad than I am to rejoice. That's the flesh, the sin that lives in us, always wanting things its own way. But what Paul is reminding his people is a chief weapon against that tendency, against that selfish sin that's in all of us: Thankfulness. Thankfulness is the antidote to the whining sinner inside all of us. It's

poison, it kills that sinner to remember all we have been given from God's own hands.

God's will is for us to hold on to that attitude of thankfulness. Gratitude is the mark of the Christian. I used to hear that all the time. Why? Because thankfulness helps us retain the proper perspective. It helps combat that tendency to get whiny and entitled, because we know what we have isn't ours. It was given to us as a free gift, no matter how whiny we are. So this is a really short instruction that encompasses all our lives, because frankly, it's a big fight not to treat God like a sinner, like a demanding child that just wants God to do everything we want and nothing else.

It doesn't save us, Jesus does that, Jesus takes care of sin, but maintaining that attitude of gratitude, that perspective of thankfulness, keeps us in the right place for living our Christian lives. We live as recipients of a gift. No matter how we are marketed, true Christianity is not holier than thou, it's not a bunch of people who think they're better than everyone else telling everyone else what to do. Christians are a bunch of people who have received a gift we didn't deserve in the least – Jesus, crucified and risen for us - and are really excited about it and want to share that excitement. The world can try to paint us as a bunch of egotistical jerks, but it doesn't fly with what God's Word tells us.

Paul goes on. **“Do not quench the Spirit.”** Yikes. A simple sentence, loads of meaning. This is a warning. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, is given to you when you believe. Paul uses a cool picture here, painting the Spirit like a fire. Don't quench it. There are a bunch of ways to quench fire, but all of them boil down to denying fire what it needs: Fuel. Fire needs oxygen and it needs something to burn.

Putting out fire takes away one of those two essential elements. Paul encourages us to do that with the Spirit. Don't take away the essentials of what makes the Spirit burn. So what are those? Well, he tells us in the next sentence.

“Do not despise prophecies, but test everything, hold fast to what is good.” Sounds generic, but Paul is talking about something specific. He says not to despise prophecies. What does that mean? Well, if I start lifting my arms and screaming about things that are going to happen in the future, then yeah, despise that. You can despise that all the way to calling the police and the mental health professionals, trust me. That's not what Paul is talking about. He's talking about the Word of God, the Scriptures, the Bible. He's talking about the folks teaching it and preaching about it. Unfortunately, the English word prophesy is as close as we can get to the Greek word Paul uses here, and that word “prophecy” makes you think of all these wacko things that Paul isn't talking about.

Paul tells us to test it, test everything, holding fast to what passes the bar, to what passes the test. So what is the test? We test everything by the Bible, them's the rules. We test things by history. We trust those interpretations, those understandings, that other, smarter Christians have come up with before us. That's our test, and that's the fuel for the fire. The Holy Spirit is given to you by the Bible, when it's preached, when it's read. Faith comes by hearing, hearing by the Word of God. That's why we meet, to keep that fire burning inside you. You won't always feel it, in all likelihood you'll rarely feel it, but it's there because God has promised and guaranteed it's there by His Son.

Finally, Paul concludes with the main point, what has always been the main point: **“Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may**

your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, he will surely do it.” Reminding us all of the promise. Christ Himself is gonna make you holy, he's faithful, it'll be done. That's what we're all looking forward to. That's why we keep the Spirit's fire alive, that's why we keep giving thanks for what we've been given.

Amen.