

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

Third Sunday of Advent

December 12, 2021

Psalm 85:1–13

1 LORD, you were favorable to your land;

you restored the fortunes of Jacob.

2 You forgave the iniquity of your people;

you covered all their sin. Selah

3 You withdrew all your wrath;

you turned from your hot anger.

4 Restore us again, O God of our salvation,

and put away your indignation toward us!

5 Will you be angry with us forever?

Will you prolong your anger to all generations?

6 Will you not revive us again,

that your people may rejoice in you?

7 Show us your steadfast love, O LORD,

and grant us your salvation.

8 Let me hear what God the LORD will speak,

for he will speak peace to his people, to his saints;

but let them not turn back to folly.

9 Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him,

that glory may dwell in our land.

10 Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;

righteousness and peace kiss each other.

11 Faithfulness springs up from the ground,

and righteousness looks down from the sky.

12 Yes, the LORD will give what is good,

and our land will yield its increase.

13 Righteousness will go before him
and make his footsteps a way.

First Reading: Zephaniah 3:14–20 (ESV):

Israel's Joy and Restoration

14 Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion;

shout, O Israel!

Rejoice and exult with all your heart,

O daughter of Jerusalem!

15 The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;
he has cleared away your enemies.

The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall never again fear evil.

16 On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

“Fear not, O Zion;

let not your hands grow weak.

17 The LORD your God is in your midst,

a mighty one who will save;

he will rejoice over you with gladness;

he will quiet you by his love;

he will exult over you with loud singing.

18 I will gather those of you who mourn for the festival,
so that you will no longer suffer reproach.

19 Behold, at that time I will deal

with all your oppressors.

And I will save the lame

and gather the outcast,

and I will change their shame into praise

and renown in all the earth.

20 At that time I will bring you in,

at the time when I gather you together;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes," says the LORD.

EPISTLE: Philippians 4:4–7 (ESV):

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Gospel: Luke 7:18–35 (ESV):

Messengers from John the Baptist

Luke 7:18–28 (ESV): 18 The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, 19 calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?" 20 And when the men had come to him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" 21 In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. 22 And he answered them, "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. 23 And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

24 When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? 25 What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings' courts. 26 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 27 This is he of whom it is written,

“ Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.’

28 I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

29 (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, 30 but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

31 “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like?

32 They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

“ ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.’

33 For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ 34 The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ 35 Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.”

Sermon 50 – Third Sunday of Advent

“God To Hand It To You”

Philippians 4:4-7

Dear friends,

We all know that prayer is powerful. We talk about it a lot. What makes me curious is what exactly that power is. We know God hears, and perhaps that is prayer's power, that God merely hears us. We know God loves His children and will make adjustments based on their requests, we have evidence of this in the Bible. Paul in our epistle lesson doesn't explain this exactly but he makes some inferences that I want to do way too much with. God's power is a curious thing, we all know its there but we can't really point to any

one specific thing to prove it. Paul reminds us that the heart, the soul, is always God's first and last object. That goes for God's power, and the power of our prayers as well. God is after the whole you. He knows what you need here on Earth, and He knows what you need in eternity, and He gives us prayer as a part of that process. Prayer is speaking to God, it is just that simple, but why is talking to God important? Paul tells us.

Philippians is a nice letter, a friendly one from Paul to a congregation that has had his back through thick and thin. These two get each other, they have a good relationship. Paul wants the best for them and that is what is powering him to share these words. The Philippians are going through some tough times and they're quite sad about Paul being in prison, so he writes them to encourage them to keep at it despite the persecution they're suffering, and to tell them that his being in prison is a good thing because it's made people a lot bolder and a lot more committed. In addition, it has put Paul in direct contact with his jailers, who are all soldiers working for the Roman emperor, and he says in the letter that they're really starting to pay attention to him.

So its encouragement and perseverance in suffering that is the goal here. In the verses before this, he wants them to end the conflicts in their church, as apparently there were two leading ladies who were at odds with each other. Then he tells them to rejoice. **“4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”** I'm going to be trying to understand this silly statement 'till the day I die probably, but I think the reason for these surprisingly unrealistic words is found around this. Paul wants these people to stick with it. He wants these two ladies to reconcile. Rejoicing is what helps both of these. Instead of a fight with each other, rejoice with each other. Instead of giving up when times get tough, rejoice in the tough times. I've talked before about how crazy that sounds, you all know that rejoicing in turmoil is pretty hard to achieve, but Paul's next words help anchor that somewhat.

“5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” Reasonable, gentle is another way to put this. What's the connection? Reasonableness is clear thinking and good sense balanced by compassion. What's logical can be awful sometimes, it can hurt. The most rational explanation can be emotionally hard on people. Good business doesn't have

room for sentiment. If you have to cut, you cut. Paul says to keep on even keel. Don't let your compassion get out of hand to keep you from making the hard decisions, but also don't let lose your good sense. Sometimes the bad times come and the tough choices have to be made. Christians are familiar with this. We have to keep strong to our doctrines, we have to be the people confessing faithfully what is right and what is wrong. That can be tough because it can really offend people, it can hurt them. So we keep our compassion on one hand, and our commitment to truth on the other, and we try to say it best we can while doing both those things. We should never surrender the truth, but we should never say the truth carelessly either.

What does any of this have to do with prayer? Paul talks about that next. **“The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”** Prayer is how you maintain that balance, and prayer is how you feed and express that attitude of rejoicing. Prayer is not for God, prayer is God's blessing for us. God doesn't need to be asked or told what to do, He knows already. God does not need to us to tell Him what we'd like to have in life, or what we need. But we need to say it. We need to speak those words aloud or in writing or however it is that you do your prayers. By speaking words to God, we are turning our minds and hearts upward toward Him. We're giving Him our attention, which helps us focus on God's power and God's compassion rather than our problems. It is the war against idolatry, the war against thinking we have to do it all ourselves, and God gives us a potent weapon to fight with. Words, talking, prayer. Prayer anchors our whole day and our whole life, helps keep it on that even keel. When you pray, do not forget God's clear words about right and wrong. When you pray, do not forget that your neighbor is a person who needs your help in all kinds of ways. Prayer is how we manage to agree with each other, it is how we keep forgiving the sins of our neighbor. It doesn't seem like it does, because we're talking to God, but in talking to God we put ourselves in the right mindset.

That is why Paul says all that about anxiety. Don't be anxious, pray instead. I manage to do both quite skillfully, I don't know about you, but the thanksgiving part is

key here. Unthankfulness is a poison that can taint even the best of faith, and so continuing that habit of thanksgiving keeps us where we belong. Jesus tells us that prayer is children asking their Father for what they need, and being thankful reminds us that we are just children to God. Still, all this is in the mind of the believer. What makes the difference? What is the power of prayer?

The key is found in that little, almost throwaway comment that Paul makes at the beginning. The Lord is at hand. Don't ignore this phrase like I almost did when I was thinking about this. The Lord is at hand. When something is at hand, it is about to happen, nearby, at the doorstep. This could be a reference to Christ's return, which is true, throughout the New Testament you find people talking about how immediate Jesus' return will be. It's always about to happen. So you could do that. But I think Paul is talking more to our situation here. Jesus will come back whenever it is that the Father decides, that is also clear from the Scriptures. When Paul says that the Lord is at hand, he means that for you right now, in prayer. When you pray, the Lord is right there with you, other parts of the Bible say that the Spirit is interceding for you. Why is this?

It is merely the result of the Christian fundamentals, the basics, that we Lutherans harp on so much. In saving you, the Lord has not left you alone. He dies on the cross, brings that to you in the Baptismal font, speaks His Word to you, and in so doing connects you to Jesus on a basic fundamental and almost biological level. Paul repeatedly describes the church – you lot – as Christ's body. That is how intrinsic your connection with God is. That is how deep it goes. That connection, that relationship, is only strengthened when you hear God's Word, eat His flesh, drink His blood. It is strengthened by your prayers to Him in the same way. Jesus forms that connection first, it is Jesus who reaches out to you through the Holy Spirit, working through the words of the Bible, to make that happen, and your prayers flow out from that. We pray because God inspires us to, He gives us His Holy Spirit which tells us to pray. So when you pray, you aren't sending a letter across the ocean. You aren't talking on a phone line with a bad connection. You aren't even shouting at the clouds, which is what the devil tells you you're doing. When you pray, Jesus is right there with you. This is why we sometimes use God's own words to pray, whether it be the

psalms or the hymns we sing. We remind ourselves of what Jesus has said, and whenever you have God's Word, you have God Himself there with you.

The power of prayer is the power to be heard. It is the power to be understood, listened to, and cared for. What God *does* with our prayers is up to Him, but it is prayer itself that is the gift, because we have a Father who listens, who takes us seriously, and who does not leave us. In your prayers the Lord is at hand. He is there with you, not just listening, but making your prayers pleasing to Him. Jesus makes sure that all His children are heard and understood by their Father in heaven.

So what do we do? Well, Paul finishes this out. **“7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** What peace is this? It is the peace of having God at hand, right there. It is the peace of knowing that God hears. It is the peace of knowing that God loves and understands, even when everything in your life is telling you otherwise. Your life might be the stuff of nightmares, but God is at hand, and God can and will make our suffering meaningful, our bad days put to a purpose. Whether it feels peaceful or not is beside the point, reality wins in the end, and the reality is we have a listening, caring Father as our God. A Father who does not ignore, will not get distracted, and is at hand for you, wherever you go.

Amen.