

Third Sunday in Advent

Psalms: 85, 107:1-16

85 Lord, thou hast been favorable unto thy land: thou hast brought back the captivity of Jacob.

² Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of thy people, thou hast covered all their sin. Selah.

³ Thou hast taken away all thy wrath: thou hast turned thyself from the fierceness of thine anger.

⁴ Turn us, O God of our salvation, and cause thine anger toward us to cease.

⁵ Wilt thou be angry with us forever? wilt thou draw out thine anger to all generations?

⁶ Wilt thou not revive us again: that thy people may rejoice in thee?

⁷ Shew us thy mercy, O Lord, and grant us thy salvation.

⁸ I will hear what God the Lord will speak: for he will speak peace unto his people, and to his saints: but let them not turn again to folly.

⁹ Surely his salvation is nigh them that fear him; that glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.

¹¹ Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven.

¹² Yea, the Lord shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her increase.

¹³ Righteousness shall go before him; and shall set us in the way of his steps.

107 O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good: for his mercy endureth for ever.

² Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he hath redeemed from the hand of the enemy;

³ And gathered them out of the lands, from the east, and from the west, from the north, and from the south.

⁴ They wandered in the wilderness in a solitary way; they found no city to dwell in.

⁵ Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted in them.

⁶ Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them out of their distresses.

⁷ And he led them forth by the right way, that they might go to a city of habitation.

⁸ Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!

⁹ For he satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness.

¹⁰ Such as sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, being bound in affliction and iron;

- ¹¹ Because they rebelled against the words of God, and contemned the counsel of the most High:
- ¹² Therefore he brought down their heart with labour; they fell down, and there was none to help.
- ¹³ Then they cried unto the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them out of their distresses.
- ¹⁴ He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and brake their bands in sunder.
- ¹⁵ Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!
- ¹⁶ For he hath broken the gates of brass, and cut the bars of iron in sunder.
- ¹³ With my lips have I declared all the judgments of thy mouth.
- ¹⁴ I have rejoiced in the way of thy testimonies, as much as in all riches.
- ¹⁵ I will meditate in thy precepts, and have respect unto thy ways.
- ¹⁶ I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word.

First Lesson: Isaiah 35:1-10

35 The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.

² It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing: the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon, they shall see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God.

³ Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees.

⁴ Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompence; he will come and save you.

⁵ Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.

⁶ Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the dumb sing: for in the wilderness shall waters break out, and streams in the desert.

⁷ And the parched ground shall become a pool, and the thirsty land springs of water: in the habitation of dragons, where each lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes.

⁸ And an highway shall be there, and a way, and it shall be called The way of holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it; but it shall be for those: the wayfaring men, though fools, shall not err therein.

⁹ No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, it shall not be found there; but the redeemed shall walk there:

¹⁰ And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

Second Lesson 1 Thessalonians 5:12-23

¹² And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you;

¹³ And to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves.

¹⁴ Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.

¹⁵ See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men.

¹⁶ Rejoice evermore.

¹⁷ Pray without ceasing.

¹⁸ In everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

¹⁹ Quench not the Spirit.

²⁰ Despise not prophesyings.

²¹ Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.

²² Abstain from all appearance of evil.

²³ And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Introduction

“Jacob Marley was as dead as a door nail. This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of this story I am about to relate.”

The opening line from Charles Dickens classic “*A Christmas Carol*” made famous by the Alistar Sim movie from 1951. In my family growing up, it was a crucial part of every holiday season. I would scour the TV guide to find out when it was playing until technology graced us with a VHS and later, a DVD of this classic movie. Today, I still watch it, although without flashy special effects my family usually fall asleep before the second ghost appears.

Most of us are familiar with the story of Scrooge and his interactions with the three spirits. This is a tale of redemption, of a man who is lost and finds himself. In the past we see Scrooge as a young man, quickly moving up the corporate ladder and finding ways to make more money, often at the expense of others. We see his childhood pain at losing his mother during his birth and also losing his sister in the same way. We see him alienating and eventually losing the love of his life due to his greed and disdain for humanity. We see him meet evil with evil as he survives his life, always looking at others with scorn and ridicule. As an adult he is wealthy beyond measure but is bankrupt in his ability to love others, show pity or remorse, and remains alone and bitter. His business partner, Jacob Marley, has died seven years before the story begins. He returns with a

warning to Scrooge. Do not do as I did, change your life before it is too late.

Perhaps knowing how stubborn and unrepentant he is, Marley arranges three spirits to come and help him see his life and to change his ways. The spirit of Christmas Past, Present and Yet to Come visit Scrooge and show him the joy, love and life he used to have and could still enjoy today. They show him the joy in other men's hearts and he begins to feel remorse, shame and a genuine desire to make amends and change his ways. The Spirit of Christmas Present shows him that even the poor, with nothing, can be happy and content as they sing Christmas carols, read passages of scripture and interact in love with each other. Because of their faith, they are like this all the time, which is what keeps them filled with joy despite not having the comforts of the wealthy. He tells Scrooge, "It is like the child born in Bethlehem, He does not exist in man's hearts but one day a year but in all the days."

Scrooge begins to come around, embrace his failings and yearn for a new life; one filled with love and connection with others. Alas though, he feels like it is too late. It is the final spirit, the Spirit of Christmas Yet to Come, that terrifies him. He sees his own death, a death alone and without redemption. This prompts him, when realizing he is afforded another chance at life, to not be the man he was and to seek a whole change in his spirit, body and mind.

As we embrace the season of Advent and examine our lives, this story can be an inspiration to all of us. Paul's letter to the Thessalonians, which Fr. Chris read today, is also a call for redemption, and a directive to examine our own choices and move toward sanctification and wholeness in Christ.

Body

(1 Thessalonians 5:12-23) Paul wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica during his second missionary journey. In it he outlines the simple rules for living a sanctified life in preparation for the second coming of Christ.

In our second lesson today, we read Apostle Paul's appeal to the people of the church of Thessalonica. The Thessalonians are a community facing persecution and confusion about the Second Coming. His advice is not complex doctrine; it is robust, everyday instruction for a sustainable life of faith. Paul's instruction breaks down Christian life into three simple, manageable areas. A life of holiness is achieved not through grand gestures, but through consistent, intentional effort in three interconnected areas: our Relationships (Community), our Attitude (Heart), and our Spiritual Integrity (Discipline).

Relationships, Attitude and Integrity

Paul describes this relationship in the first three verses of our Scripture reading by outlining how our behavior and focus on God's commandments plays out in our interaction with each other and the community. Our first direction is this, *"And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. And be at peace among yourselves."* (v.12-13) Respect is often conditional. Paul asks us to honor people for the tasks they undertake, working hard, leading others, and when they admonish or correct others, even if we do not always agree with their style. (v.13) It is up to us to respect their position and offer them support. Being a part of a community often means interacting in distinct roles and responsibilities. Honoring those in authority, working within our roles and responsibilities is the key to a functioning community that honors God.

Paul continues with his instruction in the next two verses. *"Now we exhort you, brethren, warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men. See that none render evil for evil unto any man; but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men."* (v.14-15) This is the heart and core of communal care, providing four specific actions for four specific needs. Warn and help those who are acting out and being unruly. Comfort those in our lives who are disabled or intellectually challenged, rather

than making fun of them or discarding them. Encourage the faint-hearted, offer courage and support to the anxious or those in despair.

Be patient with everyone. We are all going through some challenges or struggles in our lives. Our patience and kindness are what people need to feel whole and supported, not ridicule or impatience. Finally, Paul talks about the evil of vengeance in our lives. It is often human nature to strike back at someone who has caused us harm or when we feel attacked by others in some way. Rendering evil as a solution to evil just perpetuates more evil in our community. By turning the other cheek and offering a positive reaction prevents the cycle of retribution from entering the Christian community.

In the next section of Paul's letter, he offers three short, simple, yet radical commands of a sanctified life. These are things that come from a heart and soul transformed by God. "*Rejoice evermore, pray without ceasing and in everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.*" (v.16-18). Rejoice ever more or always find joy in your life. In this case joy is a command, not a feeling. It is a posture of hope rooted in God's faithfulness, even amid sorrow and tough times. Learn to pray without ceasing. This is not to say that one should be literally kneeling all day, but maintaining a constant awareness of God's presence, turning every thought into a form of prayer. Thanking God when things are good and you feel His presence in your life, as well as thanking him when

things are not good knowing He is still present. To pray without ceasing is to make God a part of every aspect of your life, and in everything give thanks. Giving thanks to God not just *for* everything, but also *in* everything. The key is recognizing God's sovereign love even when circumstances are painful. All three of these things, joy, prayer and thanksgiving, are explicitly identified as "the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." They define the daily mental state of a believer and someone who's heart is aligned with God.

Paul continues with his warnings to the church about keeping our reverence and religious views close to our spirit and heart. "*Quench not the Spirit, despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil.*" (v.19-22) In our lives the spirit is quenched through our willful disobedience, spiritual laziness, or cynical rejection of God's prompting. The Holy Spirit is quenched when we stop going to church and entertain thoughts and actions that reject or minimize God. It happens when we reject genuine, God-given wisdom or spiritual insights just because they are unfamiliar or come through an unexpected source. Or as is more common, they conflict with our desire for things we know are abhorrent to the commandments of God. From Verse 21 and 22. "*Prove all things; hold fast that which is good. Abstain from all appearance of evil.*" (v.21-22). Paul offers a litmus test or method of discernment to recognize things that are contrary to our spiritual life. Make sure that the

message and the messenger align with Scripture and the character of Christ. Are we prompted to love God and also to love our neighbor? Cling to those things which we have talked about in our Advent message: hope, peace, joy and love. In our journey we must maintain distance not just from evil, but from anything that *appears* evil, protecting your own conscience and your witness to others.

In his last verse, Paul offers a final prayer for wholeness and blessing. “*And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

(v.23) The wholeness of sanctification is a gift from the "God of peace." God's intent is to save us in our entirety not just our souls, but our mind, spirit and our bodies. Through the forgiveness of sin and leading a life in accordance with His word we too can be preserved until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Action

Paul, in his letter to the Thessalonians, describes the sanctified life as a three-part harmony: Love for the Community, Joy in the Heart, and Discipline in the Spirit. Consider the eight directives Paul gives to the people. See that no one renders evil for evil, but ever follows that which is good, pray without ceasing, in everything give thanks, quench not the Spirit. despise not prophesyings, prove all things; hold fast that which is good, and abstain from all appearance of evil. In this season of Advent, we are called to examine and prepare ourselves for the coming

of Christ. I urge you to pick one of these directives from Paul's Epistle to the Thessalonians and focus on it during this week. Remember that God is faithful, and He will complete the work of peace and wholeness in you as well. Trust in the one who will never fail to call you to Him.

Conclusion

Paul's advice or direction is about living our lives in alertness and rejecting spiritual darkness. Like Scrooge, the people of Thessalonica receive a wakeup call and an understanding that time is short. We cannot wait to start living our lives in accordance with God's commandments, we must do so now. Scrooge learns to "hold fast to what is good" by looking at his life in the past, present and what his future might look like. Paul stresses the importance of community and Scrooge begins to understand why people are important in his life. His transformation is demonstrated by him helping others and not meeting coldness and evil with evil. Paul commands a chosen attitude of inner piety regardless of circumstances. Scrooge's journey is precisely about relearning this attitude. Paul provides specific instructions for how believers must interact, focusing on upliftment and social responsibility. This is the central moral shift that Scrooge undergoes. Finally, at the end of the story, Scrooge wakes up and finds that he is "not the man he was." Scrooge's redemption is total, it is a wholeness that affects his spirit, his soul, his emotional capacity for love, and his actions, such as raising Cratchit's salary and

giving money to charity. He moves from a lost, fragmented, and isolated man to an integrated, whole one just as Paul hopes those in the church will do through our Lord.

In his final prayer Paul asks:

“And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Also in the words of Tiny Tim, “God bless us, everyone.”

To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.