

Advent IV Rorate Coeli December 18, 2016

This is the first time in this little experiment in which the readings for the One Year Series completely diverge from the readings for Series A on this date. The Collect is the same, but nothing else. We get these readings, but either in Epiphany or in Advent on other days and in other years, never together on the same day like this.

The readings direct our attention to the proclamation of the Gospel. Moses speaks of a prophet who will come after him. The Pharisees and scribes inquire if John is this prophet of whom Moses spoke. John points them to one who is greater than that, more than the prophet, a mighty one whose sandals John is unworthy to lace. John is merely the voice of one crying out to make ready.

And so, with God's people of old we look forward to the One of whom Moses spoke, but we also realize that Moses only saw in part. God has much more fully revealed himself to us in Jesus than even Moses foretold. He has given his very self. Paul urges us to rejoice in that fact and let the love of Christ have free reign in our lives.

The preacher might consider themes of authority, joy, forgiveness, and the office of preacher as themes for this day, but the preacher who would read and preach these texts must point to Christ and Christ alone. Read independently the readings could result in a sermon about something but when you take a step back and look at them in aggregate, you see the smiling face of our Lord looking back at us. The sermon needs to be about a certain Someone. Our task will be for us to help our parishioners see that One as well. Jesus is the reason for this season. Preach it!

Note on Luther: I have included two longer sections of Luther – his words on the Epistle and Gospel reading today. They both stoutly resisted editing. The words on Paul's Letter to the Philippians are wonderful and it was very difficult to pick and choose a reasonable sized section. I encourage you to find them and read them all. The Gospel reading offered a long but discreet section which I have reproduced in its entirety. The reader needs to be aware that Luther is not a modern interpreter. He has one foot squarely in the medieval four fold tradition of interpretation. He will make connections and draw conclusions which would have made my thoroughly modernist hermeneutics instructor at the seminary apoplectic. But I am not sure we have improved things with modernity so much. I really encourage you to persevere through Luther's sometimes strange words there. The last bit about the Christian being the master of sin, death, and hell are worth reading in their entirety.

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Quickly lifted from us... The prayer seems to have forgotten the patience to which James urged us last week. Advent focuses our attention on our need, and as the season draws to a close, we are reminded that sometimes we feel that the need is acute, the rescue must come speedily.

SIN (original sin) = brokenness. This is not really a moral category but a description of the human condition after the fall. Yes we commit sins, but that is because we are broken. Take a look at Augustana II or Formula of Concord I for more on this.

Out of SIN come many nasty things, including the nasty things I do, but also the nasty things I suffer. I get sick because my body is broken. My house might be destroyed by a flood, tornado, hurricane, earthquake, etc., because the world is broken. Ultimately this brokenness will result in my death.

Even our conception of sin is corrupted by SIN. Remember a couple of weeks ago when Isaiah envisioned a world in which the wolf and the lamb lay down together? God is planning on fixing problems I did not even know were problems!

The preacher must ask himself what are the sins that weigh us down from which a mighty and speedy rescue is required. Here is a list we generated in past discussions. Can you add to it?

- 1. Hurting relationships, the closer the relationship, the greater the weight.*
- 2. Chronic illness – especially painful or difficult illnesses that never leave us. Getting old really is hard.*
- 3. Unconfessed sin – guilt that is unresolved is a great weight on many of us.*
- 4. Defeatism – our church is dying, too small, not growing, etc.*
- 5. We often suffer from an unrealistic expectation that life should be like the movies or television shows. We are disappointed when it is not that way, and we are unwilling to do the hard work to make life better.*
- 6. Habitual sin/addiction. Am I actually in control of my life, my thoughts, my desires, or my deeds? Probably not.*

Remembering the Biblical definition of Sin, this can be pretty interesting. The Bible, of course, would define sin as anything that is not the way that God made it to be. Cancer is a sin in that definition, so is an earthquake or a war or fire in my dining room. You get the idea. The stuff that kills, destroys, hurts, maims, and makes life miserable fits inside the biblical definition of Sin. This has real implications for the confession of sins, doesn't it? Have you ever come to the Sunday morning services so worried about a bank overdraft, or a medical test, or surgery, or something else that you really could not think of anything naughty to confess? Did you feel guilty about that? (Then you know you are a true Lutheran, if you feel guilt about not feeling guilty.) My guess is that your parishioners have sometimes felt that the moral failings they believe they are supposed to confess are the least of their problems. I would furthermore guess they also wish God would come and help them with some of these real problems. If we have not proclaimed the

Jesus who died for the whole of sin and the sin of the whole world we have only preached an incomplete Gospel.

There are really two aspects to the help which Jesus brings. Does Jesus lift the burden from us or does he strengthen our backs right now that we may persevere? We wait for the day that he will lift every burden, dry every tear, etc., but right now there is also a back strengthening that happens in this. There are real consequences to our sins which often dog our lives. The knowledge of Christ and His work strengthens us now to stand stronger this day.

The rite of confession is perhaps more broadly needed. We tend to think it only applies to the moral failing, but isn't a rite of forgiveness really an expression of hope and confidence that Jesus has born the sin, the ugliness of this life so that I will not need to bear this always.

The relative problem presented by the naughty things we do would make an excellent point of debate. Perhaps we will have to do that sometimes. After all, the biggest problem I may have may well be the fact that I have not done what God has said to do. Yet, I cannot but think we might do better by our own people by saying that the biggest problems we have are the very things that God calls "sins." This way when we say that Jesus died for the sins of the world, we might just include the overdrafts, the tests, the surgery, the painful backs and knees, the failing marriage, the broken heart, the whole gamut of stuff that afflicts us, some of which is not related to naughtiness or niceness, but to the broken human condition. He died for all of it, for all of us. His blood atones for the sins of the whole world. He promises to dry every tear.

Of course this has an interesting preaching connection for the person who is coming to Christmas in our culture. The children's song suggests that Santa rewards and punishes for naughty and nice – but the One we expect is far more global and comprehensive in his work. What is more, he comes to bring salvation, rescue from all sin, death, and affliction of the Devil, to His faithful people.

So what is weighing us down that cannot wait for that rescue? What brokenness of heart, what fear, what hurt, do we bring to God this day that only his love can heal? What ogre looms over us that we need the strength of God to intervene on our behalf, driving this wretched reality away?

As preachers, this has to start with us, doesn't it? In addition to all the burdens of our own humanity, are we exhausted by the burdens of a congregation which seem just too large for us to bear? Have I tried to do Jesus' job? And our people, what weighs them down? Are they burdened by the economy? Is it their families? Is it their health? Is it death itself who has ripped a loved one from their lives? Does unresolved or unforgiven conflict make going to Church or seeing someone in the grocery a painful experience? Do you find yourself loitering the dairy section until you notice someone heading out the door? Are the doors of your church locked up because you fear a vandal, a thief, or just someone who would harm what is precious to you? Are we afraid to let Jesus out of the manger and into our own lives because the world will laugh or scorn us? Does fear dictate our behavior and thus weigh us down, distorting our lives, turning

us inward like some widow with a bent back? Have we created a fence between Church and home? Some have effectively compartmentalized their lives so much that they have a religious hour on Sunday, but Jesus has not actually died for Monday morning as much as Sunday morning. This is simply not true. Jesus has offered his forgiveness, love, help, and strength for the challenges we face every day. Jesus wants to present every day in our life, because he wants to bless every day of our lives. Jesus not the guy who lives in the building, but who inhabits our very bodies (Eph 2:19ff.) and would go with us out these doors and into our homes and workplaces.

Jesus is very holistic this way. He belongs to the whole person – he works in the whole person, emotional, intellectual, financial, spiritual, and all facets of my being.

Readings

Deuteronomy 18:15-19 *I have extended the reading several verses earlier to give you a sense of what Moses is talking about before he comes to these words about the prophet who is to come. There is irony here as God forbids the sacrifice of children but we identify the prophet of whom Moses speaks as Jesus – the very Son of God whom God sacrifices.*

⁹ *“When you come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not learn to follow the abominable practices of those nations. ¹⁰ There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer ¹¹ or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, ¹² for whoever does these things is an abomination to the LORD. And because of these abominations the LORD your God is driving them out before you. ¹³ You shall be blameless before the LORD your God, ¹⁴ for these nations, which you are about to dispossess, listen to fortune-tellers and to diviners. But as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you to do this.*

¹⁵ *“The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— ¹⁶ just as you desired of the LORD your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, ‘Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.’ ¹⁷ And the LORD said to me, ‘They are right in what they have spoken. ¹⁸ I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. ¹⁹ And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him. ²⁰ But the prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ ²¹ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the LORD has not spoken?’— ²² when a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word that the LORD has not spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously. You need not be afraid of him.*

This passage shows up in the 3 yr series on the fourth Sunday after the Epiphany in year B. Here are the notes from the last time we addressed that Sunday.

This text raises first and foremost a rather interesting issue for us. The real problem we face as broken and sinful people is not primarily a Satan problem or even a death problem, it is a God problem. The holiness of God does not tolerate the sinfulness of this rebellious creature. The people of Israel at Horeb seemed to sense that and asked that they not hear God straight up any more. And God says that is smart, he commends them for realizing this and establishes the office of prophet to serve as an intermediary, so that they would be buffered from the experience of unfiltered God in all his consuming majesty and glory. (This takes place right after giving the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20)

I have given us a little more this chapter because these important words about prophets and prophecy are embedded in a larger conversation which needs to be heard. The earlier part of the chapter is important because it give us a sense of what the alternatives were. Child sacrifice and divination were forbidden in the strongest terms. They are an abomination to God and us. What marks all these practices and the beliefs about God which they foster is the idea that we are somehow in control of this situation. Necromancy and divination, sacrificing children and palm reading are really vain attempts on the part of the human being to seize some control over life.

Of course, as a sacramental Christian, the words of the text we will read warm the cockles of my heart. God is not likely to visit anyone straight up, not because he could not do that, but because they could not handle that. He will come through some means, a person, a thing, which can mediate his presence, behind which he can hide his glory and power, so that he may speak his words of love to us.

If you take nothing else from this little reading, remember that you are handling holy things when you ascend to that pulpit on Sunday morning, when you stand at that altar and lift up that chalice. The words you say are instruments by which God will touch the hearts and minds of the people who listen to you and by which he will work his gracious change in their lives. Your voice, this sermon, your words, are instruments for his love. In the same way, the elements of the sacraments are holy things which deserve our respect.

Of course there is much more than that here, whole sermons to preach. The Christian reads this text and hears the good news that God is talking about the one who is greater than Moses, The Prophet, whose words will transcend all those who came before him and after, because he speaks as the very son of God, with an authority which belongs only to him. What sweet news when he speaks today words of forgiveness and love to us.

But remember that is not how many of your people will hear this. Several years ago when I was in Scotland, I attended the Scripture and Theology seminar at the school of theology. It was a marvelous experience, but I distinctly remember one day when we were speaking about the authority of Scripture and I could not figure out what this guy was saying that was just out of sync. He kept asserting the authority of scripture but it just did not sound right and then I

realized that he heard the word authority and could only hear that as the authority to tell him what to do. While I am sure he would also accord to God this authority it was as if he could not understand that the authoritative voice of Scripture also spoke authoritatively in a descriptive sense. He could not see that the Bible also spoke authoritatively of what God did for him, of who he was as both a sinner and as a redeemed child of God. Its authority was that of a rule book, a guide to life, purely prescriptive, not descriptive authority. Read Luther's comments under the Gospel lesson as he contended with the same issues in his day.

I wonder how many of our parishioners sing familiar songs and hear words like this, which we think are speaking Gospel to them, but they manage to turn it all into a rule for life, a guide for living, a manual on what they are supposed to do? We might sing those same songs and hear those same words and rejoice that God has spoken authoritatively of his love and grace to us, but they can only find a miserable burden laid on them. The world tells them that it is a solace, that there is something that they are supposed to do and it offers a false hope that they can do it. But it is a heavy and dreadful life to live.

This prophet does speak authoritatively, and God will require that his voice be heard. Our human nature immediately leaps to the idea that this means we have to listen to him and do what he says. This is not wrong, mind you, and there are many times when my life has fallen short of a faithful listening to him. But this is not all directed to me and you. You see, Jesus speaks to the grave and it gives up its prey. Jesus speaks to the demons, and they relinquish their hold on troubled minds, Jesus speaks to wind and waves and they are still at his command. His authoritative voice not only orders and directs my life, but it also saves me from my enemies.

We also thought that we needed to hear that the preacher is a prophet of sorts. In his comments on the Gospel reading today, Luther suggests that the prophet John the Baptist is really a paradigm of the preaching office. The preacher proclaims the reality that God has decreed and created in Christ, the Word. We too often limit our understanding of prophet to being a foreteller, but this is not the role of the prophet entirely. The prophet was more often to look at the world right now and declare what God says about that broken and sinful world. We get to proclaim that Jesus has died for it, redeemed it, forgiven the sinners, and restored the creation. In that sense a preacher is a prophet.

But divine prophets often work at a disadvantage in that he/she cannot say more or less than God has said. The world hungers for a type of certainty which we sometimes cannot give. We cannot offer the world the sort of finality or simple answers which it wants. And so it often turns to the false prophet who offers them what they want to hear. Again, read carefully Luther's notes under the Gospel reading.

Sermon Idea: The Prophet (That the Spirit of God would move the hearer to acknowledge the present authority of Christ, exercise it, and delight in it.)

This message focuses on the ways of God and his kingdom, especially as he authoritatively declares his kingdom and makes “his Kingdom come.” I wonder what we think about when we pray that interesting phrase “thy kingdom come...” in the Lord’s Prayer. The preacher might just want to review that section of the Small Catechism before he writes this sermon.

Many who pray “Thy Kingdom come” have a vision of the end of time and the glorious Parousia of Christ. That is not inappropriate. But this day focuses our attention on another “appearance” of the kingdom of God: the Prophet. The OT text reminds us of the need for this kingdom to have a hidden nature. God in his glory is too much for the sinner to bear. *Deus nudus*, the unfiltered presence of God would strip us of any agency, it would make our obedience the obedience of a slave, not the obedience of faith to which the Bible enjoins us. The demons who confess Christ’s power in the Gospels obey him, but it is not the obedience Christ seeks from his people. So God comes to us through means. We are familiar with this through sacraments which use bread and wine, water and words to convey the very love of God.

But God also uses people, indeed very ordinary, sometimes very flawed people, to announce his kingdom to this world. This sort of authority will make sense of reality. The world is often a very non-sensible place – but forgiveness allows us to see it in the sense of Christ. It is now the thing for which Jesus died. And of course, once, he used the very human incarnation of Himself to work the very salvation of the world. All of that is part of God’s wise and loving way of dealing with his sinful creation. We often long for God to reveal his power, but that is really a foolish prayer in one sense. We could not bear it, and those who do not know Christ would be utterly destroyed by that appearance of God. So he waits for our sake and theirs.

The preacher will want to unpack the role of a prophet for the hearer. This is much misunderstood. We think prophets are all about telling the future. Hardly. Most of the prophetic task is to define the present. Few of us are given the vision of Isaiah to peer through the centuries and discern the salvation events as he does in chapter 53 of his work. But that only forms a small part of his book. Most of it is in the past tense, announcing to the people what God has done, has said, and is doing and is saying. He does not primarily foretell the future, but he defines the present, the here and now. The covenant of God made at Sinai is his primary text and he spends most of his time upbraiding faithless kings, encouraging dispirited people, and declaring that this event or that event is attributable to God.

I cannot tell the future, but I can, by the virtue of baptism and the indwelling of Christ and his Spirit tell much about the present. I can tell you that you are a child of God through baptism. I can tell you that God has forgiven your sins. I can tell you that you will be brought to heaven when you die. I am a prophet!

Now, of course, the Christ is The Prophet, but that does not end prophecy so much as it changes it, indeed empowers my prophetic work because it is all done in his name. All prophecy is now about him and through him. As a member of the Body of Christ, he dwells in me and lends me his authority when I speak. Indeed he promises that when I speak a word of forgiveness, it echoes with divine authority in heaven itself.

Moses saw a day when God would raise up another Prophet, The Prophet, to which all the world would listen. He would come from among us. Glory to God! He has done it, and more amazingly than we would ever have imagined. Not only is Jesus one of us, he is one with us, and now that prophetic office is carried out by every Christian for the sake of this world. Every second grader who forgives a playmate for the sake of Christ is a prophet of God's great and glorious kingdom! She has spoken God's sweet word, and God backs up her words with his own immeasurable authority.

We are not trying to give our people a new job with this, but to let them see that this is what they are already doing. We want to define reality and the lives they live in that reality.

Psalm 111

¹ Praise the LORD!

I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

² Great are the works of the LORD,
studied by all who delight in them.

³ Full of splendor and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures forever.

⁴ He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and merciful.

⁵ He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.

⁶ He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the inheritance of the nations.

⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy;

⁸ they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

⁹ He sent redemption to his people;
he has commanded his covenant forever.
Holy and awesome is his name!

¹⁰ The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practice it have a good understanding.
His praise endures forever!

The psalm also appears in Epiphany 4, series B, coupled with the same OT lesson.

This Psalm speaks the words of the faithful Christian who has heard today's readings. God has caused his righteousness to be remembered. He has done these things. He sent redemption to his people and commanded his covenant forever. Notice that God is the subject of all these verbs.

Our human nature likes to be the subject of the verbs. We like to think that we are the people who make the difference.

The final verse is perhaps one of those familiar verses. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. What does it mean that this fear is engendered in the list of divine actions which are listed out above?

On a translational note: the opening phrase in Hebrew is simply “Hallelujah!” That served the Church for many years. We did not need to translate it. Do we need to now? What has changed? Are we just not able to learn what that word means?

Philippians 4:4-7 This reading also gets extended both before and after. Paul seeks to settle a quarrel (?) between two members of the parish before he launches into our reading which is an exhortation to joy and Christian life. That’s not an accident. Conflict sucks the joy out of any parish. The material which follows is also important. Without joy we can do nothing that is truly excellent. Luther will help us see that.

¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

² I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. ³ Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

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.

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Luther

1. This Epistle reading is short, but it is an important and rich teaching of the Christian faith. First, it teaches how we should act toward God and, second, toward our neighbor. It says: *Rejoice in the Lord always.*

2. This joy is a fruit and result of faith, as he says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, chastity” (Gal. 5:22-23). It is impossible for a heart to rejoice in God which does not first believe in Him. Where there is no faith, there is only fear, flight, timidity, and sorrow as soon as God is even thought of or named; indeed, there is hatred and enmity toward God in such hearts. The reason for this is that the heart finds itself

guilty in its conscience and has no confidence that God is gracious and favorable, since it knows that God is the enemy of sin and horribly punishes it.

3. To say much to these hearts about rejoicing in God is the same as if I would try to persuade water to burn. That would not at all work, for they feel the hand of God pressing on their conscience. Therefore, the prophet says, "Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and boast, all you Godly people!" (Psalm 32:11). It is the just and the righteous who are to rejoice in the Lord. Therefore, this Epistle was not written for sinners, but for saints. The sinners must first be told how to be freed from their sins and receive a gracious God; then the joy will follow of itself when they are freed from their evil conscience.

4. But how does one get free from an evil conscience and receive a gracious God? I answer: I have said enough about that above in the previous postil and will speak of it afterward infrequently. Whoever would have a good conscience and find a gracious God must not begin with works, as the deceivers do, who still further torment hearts and increase hatred for God. Rather, he must despair of all works, apprehend God in Christ, grasp the Gospel, and believe what it promises.

5. When this correct faith in the Gospel is in the heart, then to him God becomes sweet and loving. Then the heart feels nothing but favor and grace in all kinds of confidence and is unafraid of his punishment; it is secure and in good spirit because God has given it superabundant grace and goodness in Christ. Therefore, such faith must result in love, joy, peace, singing, thanking and praising; he then has a completely heartfelt delight toward God, as toward his dearest and most gracious Father, who deals with him in such a fatherly way and, without any merit of his own, abundantly pours out His goodness on him.

Let your gentleness be known to everyone

9. Now that he has instructed them how they are to act toward God so that they serve Him with happy hearts, he briefly handles how they are to act toward people...

19. I cannot portray this point better than with [the conduct of] two good friends. As you see them act toward each other, so we ought to act toward all people. What did they do? Each one did what pleased the other; each one yielded, gave in, tolerated, did, or did not do what he saw useful or pleasing to the other – and yet all was free, unconstrained. Thus each one adapted and accommodated himself to the other, and neither compelled the other to do that. If one touched the other's property, he did not hold it against him. In short, there was no law, no rights, no coercion, no need, but only freedom and goodwill. Nevertheless, all these things happened so abundantly that otherwise one could not have demanded the hundredth part of them without law and coercion...

And may the peace of God, which is higher than all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus

38. See how orderly and beautifully St. Paul teaches a Christian. First, he is to be joyful in God through faith, and then be gentle and kind toward people. But when he asks: “How can I?” [Paul] answers: “The Lord is near” (4:5). “But what if I am persecuted and everyone robs me?” He says, “Do not worry about anything; ask God, and let Him take care of things” (see 4:6). “But meanwhile I will become weary and confused.” “Not so, for the peace of God will preserve you” Let us now look at that.

41. This is the peace of the cross, the peace of God, the peace of conscience, Christian peace, which makes a person outwardly calm, satisfied with everyone, and upset about no one. Reason cannot understand or cause a person to have joy under the cross or peace in the midst of discord. It is the work of God, with which no one is familiar except the person who has experienced it.

(Luther’s Works, Vol. 75. CPH. Pp. 157-9, 163, and 169-170.)

We had this text on Advent 3 in series C. Here is what we said when we last looked at that.

Four sermons in this text – do we want to develop one of these:

1. *Rejoice always – Paul just got done talking about a conflict in a congregation. Even then we can rejoice in Christ.*
2. *Let your reasonableness be known to all – Paul never let things get to him. He was always able to talk it out with someone. He was always able to be problem solver with someone, even someone who hated him. He was a reasonable sort of person, but that was not because Paul was that way natively – Saul of Tarsus was not reasonable. Paul the Apostle was (consider Sosthenes in I Cor. 1 and Acts 18)*
3. *The Lord is at hand – a theology of prayer. Our supplication is embedded in prayer and thanksgiving. God not a vending machine, but we are in a relationship with him. Jesus is right here.*
4. *The peace of God that surpasses understanding. It is Lutefisk season. You could start by talking about the piece of cod that surpasses understanding and work from there. ☺*
5. *Bonus: Extend the text – a sermon on excellence – the presence of Christ means we think and do the things that are excellent.*

Are we too busy celebrating Christmas to rejoice? Is Paul just laying an impossible burden on us? We have the oxymoronic command to rejoice. This is a little like commanding someone to love. If I am rejoicing out of obedience to the command, is it really joy? I really loathe it when some speaker says, “Good morning!” and then berates the audience for a response that is not enthusiastic enough and demands that they do it again. But it is Paul saying this and this is the Word of God. God’s Word creates that which it demands. Light sprang into being when God demanded that it shine in the creation. Likewise God’s Word here creates the joy.

Our faith is not a matter of unreasonable or mindless religious fervor. We have a reasonableness which is evident to all or at least is knowable by all. I think that the reasonableness of Paul has to do less with his rational appearance and more to do with the fact that he always had an ability to talk to anyone, even someone who had tried to kill him (Sosthenes!) He was always reasonable, never reactionary or an ideologue. That reasonable justification for our joy is the immanence of the Lord. He is at hand. That belief changes everything about me. I solve problems, answer questions, meet challenges, love my spouse, care for my children, all them differently because Jesus is there. He is the reason not just for the season, but for my whole joyful life. I am not beaten down by my situation because I know that Jesus is here and there is nothing that can change that truth. Remember, Paul is writing these words from prison. And it was not always for the folks in Philippi. I have included the verses right before this in which Paul seems to helping two squabbling women in the parish patch things up. Conflict is a fast track to an unhappy congregation.

Paul exhorts them not to be anxious about anything, and the key to that is prayer, to take everything to God with supplication and thanksgiving. It is that thanksgiving piece which is the real focus of Paul's words. God is not a divine vending machine dispensing the requested salvation, but we find ourselves in a dynamic relationship with him in which we are resting in his hands, and we recognize that the whole of our life is related to him. That means that we claim no good thing but receive them all from him with thanksgiving. The person who is well along on this sort of a spiritual growth trajectory will find him or herself thanking God even for things which the world finds difficult. Paul rejoices in his imprisonment because it has given him a chance to witness to the imperial guards. Corrie Tenboom in Ravensbruck thanked God for fleas and lice because it kept the guards at a distance and allowed them to read their secret copy of the Scriptures.

This peace of God, which surpasses all human understanding, keeps us. This is the traditional conclusion to sermons, at least in my youth and I retain the practice to this day. There is a real tension inside the text at this point. Our reasonableness is evident to all, but the peace which transforms us and which keeps us in Christ transcends human understanding.

We can be reasonable about this, but we have to admit we don't fully understand all this ourselves. Living in a mystery is not an unreasonable thing to do. I don't always know how Christ is present in my life, how his peace is able to do what it does, but I can bear reasonable witness to the reality of what it does to me. I don't exactly have to understand the dynamic of how Christ's presence makes my struggle with cancer or financial ruin or some other tragedy a serene and even joyful experience. But I can tell you that Christ has made even this reality different because he is part of it.

Sermon Idea: A Persistent Joy (That the Holy Spirit would bestow durable, persistent joy on the hearer.)

Paul seems to speak foolishness to us today. How can we rejoice always, in all circumstances? Doesn't he know that there are terrorists out there trying to kill us? Didn't he see this last

election cycle? Wasn't he there in the doctor's office at my last visit when I heard bad news? Doesn't he know about my friends cancer or my daughter's troubled marriage? Rejoice, he says? Rejoice in a time like this?

No, Paul is not psychotic, he is filled with faith, the same faith God spoke to us in our baptism. We need to be careful, here, this is not entirely reasonable. One does not reason a person into this sort of joy. Paul himself writes these words from prison. He admits earlier in the letter that he is likely to be poured out like a drink offering, a morbidly accurate depiction of his death by beheading which does in fact happen. Yet, throughout the book Paul speaks of joy. This admonition to joy is really the theme of the whole letter.

Reading the earlier section of Paul's letter will reveal to the preacher just how astute Dr. Luther is in his assessment of Paul's exhortation to Joy. For Paul Christ has completely displaced his ego. When he was on that highway to Damascus looking for Christians to persecute, it was really all about Paul fulfilling the Law. The law had made him a monster, the very sort of person Luther describes above. But Christ knocked him off that horse and Christ simply occupied that central point in his life. Listen to Luther's words on humility here and in his commentary on the Gospel reading. Paul was no longer the center of that universe. And that gave him joy.

You cannot argue someone into that place, you must proclaim it. Jesus has come, seen our misery, known our sin, and loved us anyway. He has picked us up from death's grave, rescued us from Satan's maw, and restored us to the good favor of God. There is nothing the world can throw at us that changes any of that or which takes that joy away from us.

We are on the cusp of Christmas. The world will gin up some joy in this season. It will look to lights and gifts and feasting and think that it has joy. Meanwhile God's people gather in sanctuaries to sing all the verses of the Christmas hymns which assail our senses in the stores these days. "What child is this.." we might hear, but do we ever get to the second verse there about "Nails, spear, shall pierce him through..." probably not. Madison Avenue leaves those disquieting verses out. It tends to depress the impulse to upgrade the gizmo we are giving to our spouse to the platinum version.

But we will sing those verses, about nails and spears, about this child's purposeful birth which reaches its end in Calvary's cross. And in those cherished carols, in this preached word, in this baptism and supper, the real feast of Christmas, Christ will take his place in our hearts and our lives will overflow with this persistent joy that lets us be the reasonable people that Paul describes in the rest of the text.

John 1:19-28

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.

Luther *Luther’s substantial first section on this Gospel reading is an analysis of the historical and literary context – carefully noting points at which the four Gospels diverge in their witness to John and his preaching. John’s interlocutors from the Priests and Levites are cast as anyone who opposes the Gospel, and hence the Pope and his minions are thoroughly castigated. The words below come from the final section which Luther labeled the “Spiritual” or even “Secret” meaning of these words.*

44. This is the sum of it: This Gospel reading depicts the preaching office of the New Testament, what it is, what it does, and what happens to it.

45. First, it is the voice one calling, not a piece of writing. The Law and the Old Testament are dead writings, put into books, but the Gospel is to be a living voice. Therefore, John is a figure and an image and also an author, the first of all preachers of the Gospel. He writes nothing but calls out everything with his living voice.

46. Second, the Old Testament or the Law was preached among the tents at Mount Sinai to the Jews alone. But John’s voice is heard in the wilderness, freely and openly, under the heavens, before all the world.

47. Third, it is a calling, clear, and loud voice, that is one that speaks confidently and fearlessly and fears no one, neither death, hell, life, world, devil men, honor, disgrace, or any creature. Thus Isaiah says: “A voice says ‘Preach!’ And I said, ‘What shall I preach?’ All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever.” Again: “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, preacher; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, preacher; lift it up, fear not” (Isaiah 40:6-9). The world cannot endure the Gospel; therefore, there must be a strength which despises it and can cry out against fearlessly.

48. Fourth, John’s clothes are of camel’s hair, and he has a leather belt (Matt. 3:4). Although this signifies the strict and chaste life of preachers, it above all signifies the nature of the preaching or of the Gospel. It is a voice, but not embellished with soft clothes; it does not dissemble or flatter. It is a preaching about the cross – a hard, rough, sharp speech for the old man – and it girds the loins for spiritual and bodily chastity. This is taken from the life and

words of the dead patriarchs, who like camels have borne the burden of the law and of the cross. He ate wild birds [*sic*] and wild honey – the wild birds of this land, but here other animals in that land. This means those who receive the gospel, namely, the humble sinners, who take the Gospel to themselves and in themselves.

49. Fifth, John is on the other side of the Jordan. “Jordan” means the Holy Scriptures, which have two sides. The left side is the bodily understanding, which the Jews have. John is not there, for that [understanding] does not produce sinner, but saints, arrogant about their works. The right side is the true spiritual understanding, which rejects and kills all works in order that faith alone may remain in all humility. The Gospel brings this [understanding], as Paul does when he says, “The Scripture concludes that they are all sinners” (Romans 3).

50. Sixth, here begins the dispute between true and false preachers. The Pharisees cannot endure John’s voice, they despise his teaching and Baptism and remain obdurate in their doings and teachings. But on account of the people they pretend to think highly of him. But because he does not want what they want, he must be possessed of the devil, and finally he must be beheaded by Herod.

So it is now, and so it has always been. No false teacher wants people to say that he preaches without or against the Gospel, but, on the contrary, that he things highly of it and believes in it. Nevertheless, he does violence to it, making it conform to his meaning. This the Gospel cannot permit, for it stands firm and never lies. Then [the Gospel] is reviled as heresy and error, as the doctrine of devils, until they do violence to it and forbid it and cut of its head so that it may nowhere be preached or heard. This was done by the pope in the case of John Hus.

51. Thus he is a truly Christian preacher who preaches nothing but that which John proclaimed, and firmly insists upon it. First, he must preach the Law so that the people may learn what great things God demands of us, which we cannot do because of the powerlessness of our nature which has been corrupted by Adam’s fall, and thus baptize with the Jordan. The cold water means the teaching of the Law, which does not kindle love, but rather extinguishes it. For through the Law, man learns how difficult and impossible the Law is. Then he becomes hostile to it, and his love for it cools; he feels that he hates the Law from the bottom of his heart. That is then a grievous sin, to be hostile to God’s commands.

Then man must humble himself and confess that his lost and that all his works are sins along with his whole life. The John’s Baptism has been accomplished, and he has been not only sprinkled but also baptized. The he sees why John says “Repent.” He understands that John is right and that everyone must mend his ways, or repent. But Pharisees and those holy in their own works do not arrive at this understanding, nor do they permit themselves to be baptized. They think that they do not need repentance, and therefore John’s words and Baptism are foolishness in their eyes.

52. Second, when the first teaching of the Law and Baptism are over, and man, humbled by the knowledge of himself, must despair of himself and his powers, then begins the second part of the teaching, in which John points the people away from himself to Christ and says, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes on Himself the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). By this he means to say: "First, I have by my teaching made you all sinners, condemned all your works, and told you to despair of yourselves. But in order that you may not also despair of God, I will show you how to get rid of your sins – not that you can take off your sins or make yourselves godly through your works; another man is needed for this. I cannot do it, but I can point Him out. It is Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. He – He, and no one else either in heaven or earth – takes our sins on Himself. You yourself could not pay for the very smallest of sins. He alone must take on Himself not only your sins but all the sins of the world, be they great or small, many or few." This, then, is preaching and hearing the pure Gospel and recognizing the finger of John, who points out to you Christ, the Lamb of God.

53. Now, if you can believe that this voice of John is true, and if you can follow his finger and recognize the Lamb of God carrying your sin, then you have gained the victor, then you are a Christian, a master of sin, death, hell, and all things. Then your conscience will rejoice and become heartily fond of this gentle Lamb of God. Then you will love, praise, and give thanks to our heavenly Father for this unfathomable wealth of His mercy, preached by John and given in Christ. You will become willing to do His divine will, as best you can, with all your strength. For what more comforting and delightful message can be heard than that our sins are not ours anymore, that they no more lie on us, but on the Lamb of God? How can sin condemn such an innocent Lamb? [Sin] must be vanquished and blotted out by Him, and likewise death and hell (the reward of sin) must also be vanquished. See what God our Father has given us in Christ!

54. Take care, therefore; take care, lest you presume to get rid of the smallest of your sins through your own merit before God, and lest you take the title away from Christ, the Lamb of God. John testifies and says, "Mend your way, or repent." But he does not mean for us to mend our ways and to take off our sins by ourselves. He declares this powerfully by adding: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" As we have said above, he means that each one is to know himself and his need for correction; yet he is not to look for this in himself, but in Jesus Christ alone.

Now may God our Father, according to His mercy, help us come to this knowledge of Christ, and may He send into the world the voice of John, with many evangelists! Amen.

(Luthers Works, Vol. 75. CPH. Pp. 184-186.)

This reading along with some verses from earlier in the chapter appears in Advent 3 of Series B. Here is an edited version of what we said the last time we treated these words.

Are the Pharisees and their emissaries in this text really in the dark? (Picking up the Collect's metaphor and one which John uses extensively.) Are they really impeding the progress of this kingdom? Do they present a preachable moment here?

We wondered where this text applied to folks today. Do we need our lives straightened out? Undoubtedly! John points to Jesus and he stands among the people. They don't know him, but he is right there in the midst of the people who don't know him. Isn't that really our joyful task? We don't bring Christ to the nations. He is already there. We point to him, we notice him, we delight in him and we sing his praises to the people who are blindly looking but never finding. He is right there, their search is over. Of course, the first order of business here is probably to address the folks who sit in pews and don't really notice that Jesus is there.

More John the Baptist – this time from John. The repentance message is still there, sharply spoken again, but this time John the Evangelist seems to speak of John the Baptist also as a witness, the one who points to Christ. Here we actually get a little more of the repentance message from John. The leaders of the Jews come out there and query him about who he really is. Is he Elijah or the Christ or the Prophet? (See the OT lesson for today. Moses had told them to expect a prophet who would come after him – some in the time of Jesus thought this would be a sort of super-prophet, a singular individual. This would actually translate into Islam and they consider Mohammad to be the fulfillment of that prophecy.) John's response is emphatic. He is none of those things; instead, he is the preparation, the voice in the wilderness crying out to make straight the way for the one who is more than prophet, but also priest and king who is to come.

One could combine this with the Epistle reading and preach the joy of Advent as the people who have heard that message of John the Baptist and are engaged in that preparatory work, both in terms of personal reform and larger or communal reform. This is to give energy to the reforming impulse. Everyone can see that something has to be done with their own life and the world. But the energy is often lacking. Like the overweight person who knows that they have to shed some pounds, the willpower is lacking when the Christmas cookies are sitting on the table. They need to look forward to the joy of better health if they will resist that impulse to eat the whole batch.

What the arrival of Jesus does for the Christian is to give a sense of urgency and energy to the reforming act. If I am only doing this for myself, then so what? But if I am doing for the king who is to come, who is coming to my life, then it gets a little more punch. Think of cleaning before guests arrive, think of making a meal for a friend who is coming over, think of lovingly wrapping a gift for someone that you cherish. Those things might be drudgery and might not even get done, but for the guest, for the friend, for the loved one, they become a pleasure, even a joy to do.

The Christian who wrestles with sin, who feeds the hungry, or comforts a grieving neighbor, has a completely different feel for those things than someone who does it for a living. We do it because we are alive. The living has already been given, it is simply our life, and it is a joy to us. Whenever we are about the light-shedding work of Christ, whether that is in our own disciplines of prayer and worship and giving thanks or whether it is in the communal disciplines of loving

and serving our neighbor, this is not the imposition of something that is “good for us” in the same way that exercise and the right diet is good for us. This is getting up to run in the morning and eating the right things because we love life and we love our families and we want to spend that time with them.

Sermon Idea: Jesus stands among them (Gospel Lesson: That the Spirit of God would infect his people with a holy joy – they have a ridiculously easy job, pointing out a Jesus who stands among a people who don’t recognize him.)

John makes a wonderful statement in the Gospel lesson today. Both Johns say this, the Baptist to the folks then and the Evangelist to us. He speaks of One who is among the people, but they don’t recognize him. John knows his greatness, for John is not worthy even to tie up his sandals, but he is there. John does not bring the Messiah nor do we bring Christ to the nations, but we point out the One who is right there.

This sermon speaks of Jesus identification with his fallen creation. He has come to save it. He loves it. He does not wait for it to welcome him or to get something right. He comes. He puts himself right in the middle of His people.

Our job, sweet as it is, is to point to him like John did. Where shall we see him today among the people of this community and planet? This will start with us. He has made himself present to us in word and sacrament. That should help us look out there and see him in the community too. The same Jesus who comes to us is also the same Jesus who is out there, great and mighty, whose sandals we are not worthy to untie either. We kneel at his altar here, we hear his word, and we touch him in baptism, so that when we go out there, we are equipped to recognize him.

We must ask, where is he? He once stood among the penitents who lined up for John’s baptism. He was wearing the human nature of that Jewish carpenter, the very human nature he retains to this day. We do not expect him in the miracles, but in the incarnation. Where is he? Jesus is still healing folks. He is feeding the multitudes. He is befriending the lonely. He is in hospitals and clinics, he is found in neighbors who help neighbors and much more.

We discussed Patrick the African fellow who attended church with Phil. He is a refugee whom Lutheran Social Services has resettled. He saw the Lutheran church near his home and wanted to go. He was terrified to come to church the first day. His mother told him that they likely ate people there. He wasn’t sure. In Africa the cans of food always showed what was on the inside of the can on the label. When he went to the grocery store, had he not seen cans with pictures of smiling people on the outside? Perhaps they did eat people. Finally, however, he screwed up the courage to walk in the door, after twice turning away. He learned, the potlucks were not cannibalistic, they may not have always been heart healthy but the Lutherans there did not eat people; they loved people, him and his family. Eventually he even got his mother to come with him. Jesus was there in the handshake of the man who greeted him at the door, he was in the

pastor who welcomed him, forgave him, taught him, and communed him. Jesus was even in loving hands of the woman who made the bowl of green Jell-O he tried at the potluck.

Where is Jesus today? God promises that he is among the folks who do not know him. Sometimes that will be us, sometimes it will really surprise us when we see his smiling face glittering at out from the crowds of folks who look strange to us. We came to know the love of Jesus in the broad smile and strange accent of a man from the Congo. But make no mistake, he is out there. Open your eyes. Find him. Point to him. John did.

One day he will reappear. On that day, all will see him. But he is here now. He has opened your eyes today to see him so you can point to him wherever you see him.