

“JOY AND PEACE, THE CHRISTMAS FRUIT”

Advent 3C December 13, 2009

Zephaniah 3:14-20; Canticle 9;

Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

Introduction:

On Christmas tradition is that of fruitcake – cake full of different pieces fruit. In our lessons for today there are two words that stand out as the fruit of Christmas: joy and peace. For example, from Zephaniah are these images and phrases: sing, shout, “rejoice and exult with all your heart.” ... *The LORD has taken away the judgments against you, he has cast out your enemies. The Lord your God is in your midst.... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.*

In Canticle 9, we read: *For the Lord is my stronghold and my sure defense, and he will be my Savior. Therefore you shall draw water with rejoicing from the springs of salvation.... Give thanks to the Lord and call upon his Name;... see that they remember that his Name is exalted. Sing praises of the Lord, ... Cry aloud, ... ring out your joy,*

In Philippians there is this famous passage:
⁴*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.*
Then, there is verses 6 & 7: ⁶*Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with*

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thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

⁷And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Our Gospel lesson has words from John The Baptist for us to consider this morning. He says two things about fruit, one that is negative and another that is positive. First the negative from verse 9: *every tree that does not bear good fruit will be chopped down and thrown into the fire.* Secondly the positive from verse 8: *⁸Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*

What fruit should we be producing? How about, at the minimum, the fruit from today's lessons – joy and peace?

So, Where Do We Go To Acquire Joy and Peace?

This Wednesday evening we are wrapping up a long study we've been engaged in having to do with the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. We've been doing this serious study about the Holy Spirit because we want our ministry to be more Godlike, more powerful, more life-changing. I believe it is God's will for Holy Cross not only to survive as a church but, more importantly, to thrive. In my mind, thriving is not about the quantity of our ministry; that is, it is not about how many people worship here. It is

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about how many lives are being eternally changed because they have become true disciples of Jesus Christ.

For me, the driving passage of Scripture for Christian ministry comes from 2 Corinthians 5:17-20. Here is the key thought: *“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself; and to us He has given the Ministry of Reconciliation.”* For me, that is the paradigm that shapes who we are and that verse is our marching orders regarding what we do. Coupled with the Great Commandment to *“love the Lord our God with our entire heart, mind, soul and strength; and our neighbor as ourselves”* (Mark 12:30 & 31) – we are to help people be reconciled to God, to others, and to themselves. It is essentially a ministry about the healing of relationships: our relationship with God, with Others, and with our Self.

I think this paradigm for ministry is fairly easy to comprehend. It is, however, virtually impossible to accomplish without the empowerment of Almighty God through the agency of the Holy Spirit. We cannot do what God calls us to do without God working in and through us to accomplish God’s will. That is God’s rule, not mine. God keeps responsibility for the end result of our ministry efforts. God does it out of love for us, because sometimes what we try to do for God seems to fail; and if

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we were responsible for the end result we would end up feeling guilty that we let God down. That would make us a fertile field for the Devil to sift us and cause us to lose our enthusiasm for the work of God.

Our entire stewardship effort – *The Way of The Cross* – is founded on this paradigm for ministry. We volunteer for the areas of service to which we think God is leading us to participate. We serve, giving it our very best, growing in our relationship with God, with others, and within ourselves, but leaving the end result of our efforts to God’s responsibility.

I want there to be a unified mindset in our church that we don’t operate in our own strength. It is all through the indwelling, and empowerment, of the Holy Spirit; and whatever the results our efforts seem to be, our big, gracious God accepts the responsibility. Therefore, we can give ourselves enthusiastically to the work of ministry.

At minimum, we can operate with, what I’m calling

The Christmas Fruit:

In our study of the person and work of the Holy Spirit one section of Scripture we took some time to examine was Galatians 5:22-26, where St. Paul describes what he calls, “The Fruit of the Spirit”. In his list of the

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personality traits of Jesus Christ that he says the Spirit is trying to build into us are these two qualities: Joy and Peace.

When you think of Jesus, can you imagine that He was a person who easily exhibited joy and peace? Do you think Jesus was at peace in his relationship with God, with others and with himself? Do you think Jesus was joyful in the daily adventure of life? I do. My favorite picture of Jesus is the one called, "Jesus Smiling". I love that portrayal of Jesus. I love the idea that Jesus was joyful. He was at peace with his life and it showed on his face. I can imagine Jesus sitting around the campfire at night with his disciples joking and ribbing them about their lack of comprehension of the life God was calling them to live.

I see evidence of that joyful, somewhat kidding, sarcasm that develops between friends in a scene from Luke's Gospel, chapter 22: It is the Last Supper; Jesus has instituted what will become Holy Communion; the Disciples begin to quarrel among themselves about who was the greatest so Jesus has to give them some hard teaching about greatness in the Kingdom of God. He then tells Peter that Satan has asked permission to sift him as wheat, but he (Jesus) has been praying for him that when

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that time of testing is over he (Peter) will be able to strengthen his brothers.

Jesus then tells Peter that before the rooster crows that day he would three times deny even knowing him. Jesus goes on to remind the disciples that when he sent them out two by two to practice what he had been teaching they went without purse, bag, or sandals, yet did not lack anything. Now, at the time of his arrest and crucifixion, he says they will need their purses, and bags, and if they don't have a sword they should sell their cloaks and buy one because it was prophesied that the Christ would be numbered with transgressors, and all things needed to be fulfilled.

I think the reference to buying swords was a tongue-in-cheek comment. As humans all the disciples were transgressors of God's perfect Law. They all sinned. That night Peter would deny even knowing Jesus. But, as humans, the disciples often misunderstood Jesus' point. Buying swords would not make them transgressors any more than you owning a handgun makes you a criminal. Never-the-less, the disciples trying to impress Jesus that they get what he is talking about tell him they have two swords among them. Here is where the joyful banter among friends comes in. He says, "Two swords? O yeah

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guys, two swords! Hey, that's impressive. That will surely be enough to defeat the armies of evil that are about to come upon us. I'm glad you guys have been paying so much attention the last three years." I truly think, sometimes God just watches and listens to us, and laughs. Before God, we are all blondes. We just don't get it.

Jesus was at peace with his God, his friends, and himself. His joy came from that deep abiding peace that satisfied his very soul. One thing that is clear from today's lessons is that God wants us to exhibit the same spiritual qualities of Joy and Peace. They are, for us the Christmas fruit, those personality traits of Jesus that we need each day in this journey through life. We acquire them when we allow Jesus to be born into the manglers of our own existence; when we allow the very Spirit of the Living God to raise us up and shape us into the image of Jesus Christ.

This won't happen by accident and it won't happen without our cooperation. God doesn't possess us like the Devil does. God comes gently to us and we yield to his presence and love, thus beginning the process of transformation that makes us increasingly more like Jesus.

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My prayer for all of us is that we will allow Jesus fully into our lives this year so that 2010, will be the best year of our lives.