

Being the Church at Brentwood

A People of Joy

Ps. 126 & 1 Thess 5:16-24
(Hymns –119, 410, 142, 125)

December 11, 2011 – Advent 3

I've tried this week to imagine
what it might have been like
to hear this letter read for the first time.

I'd be sitting in a house
somewhere in the north of what is now Greece,
in the region of Macedonia.
The city surrounding me is a major trade hub
and administrative centre for the Roman Empire.

I've gathered with 25-30 others who share my conviction
that in Jesus of Nazareth
the God of Israel came in the flesh to fulfill his promises
to create a people to be his companions
in bringing about the kingdom of heaven on earth.

It was a bold claim made by an apostle by the name of Paul,
who had been instrumental in gathering our community together.

We had recently had a visit from Timothy,
one of Paul's closest colleagues in this early missionary work.

They were both passionate and eloquent
in their testimony about the power of God's Holy Spirit
to nourish souls to flourish in the grace of Jesus Christ
and transform our lives through the joy of being God's friends.

Grace and peace came to through their ministries
and continued to grow among us
as we met weekly for worship, learning, fellowship, and service.

It is at one of those worship gatherings,
normally followed by a meal together,
that we listened to Paul's letter.

There were warm smiles all around
as we remembered his days with us –
the depth of his convictions, the clarity of his teachings,
the wisdom of his advice, and the breadth of his care,
not only for us but for all the people of this city.

He encouraged us, comforted us,
and kept urging us to live lives that pleased God,
lives that showed others how the energy of God's kingdom
transformed our fearful need to control things
into a powerful courage to be a blessing to all.

We knew God was at work within us and among us
in helping us to believe and act
in ways that brought hope and joy
into a city that was all too short of them.

Out of this newly focused faith in the redemption accomplished by Jesus Christ
has arisen the strength to live lives of mutual respect and love.

Some of the closing words of Paul in this letter
have stuck with me.

I will memorize them so I can recall them
when confronted with my tendency to be fearful and angry.

“Be joyful always, pray at all times,
be thankful in all circumstances.
This is what God wants for you
in your life in union with Jesus Christ.”

It's that life in union with Jesus Christ
that brings joy to each of us individually and all of us together.

What a powerful grounding out of which to live lives of blessing
in this bustling, bombastic, bigoted, base, and bitter city.

That's the evil that surrounds us,
an evil that arises from a multitude of fears
and that urges us to control everything so we are safe and secure.

Our only true peace and joy come from God's gift of union with Jesus Christ.
That's the assurance Paul reminds us of in this letter.

It's joy in our faith,
joy in the gift that comes in our relationship with Jesus Christ,
in our union with Jesus Christ,
in being in Christ.

That was the focus of Paul's ministry among us,
the constant centre of his teaching.

By God's grace, through God's loving initiative,
we are reconciled and reconnected with him in Christ.
God is with us and we have nothing to fear.

I'm so glad I came to worship this morning and heard these words.
They strengthened me to go out and witness to God's love
in everything I do in this coming week.

So, those were my reflections this week
as I tried to imagine myself in the community of Christians
gathered in Thessalonica to hear this letter read for the first time.
I hope they have helped you, along with me,
get a sense of Paul's understanding of the church as a people of joy,
a sense of his convictions about the source of that joy
in our union with Jesus Christ,
and a sense of the ways in which that joy
cannot be contained within us,
but must burst out in blessing to the world around us.

That's really the message I'm taking away
from reading and reflecting on this passage this week.

That message has come alive for me this week
in a couple of situations.
I won't go into detail,
but here's what my joy in my union with Jesus Christ
enabled me to do.

I let go of my fear and anger
in order to be found by the Holy Spirit's hope and compassion.
That releasing allowed me to experience God's intended joy.

I let go of my need to control things
in order to give the Spirit space and time
to work the miracles of understanding and patience.
That releasing allowed me to experience God's intended joy.

Just a couple of very quick examples
of how Paul's wisdom worked in my life this week.

I hope you have found the same in yours.

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