

12 December 2021
The Third Sunday of Advent

Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Better than Christmas”

Text: Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 7:18-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Do not be anxious about anything. That’s what the apostle Paul said today. He wrote that to the Philippian Christians, but also to us. I don’t know, I’m not sure, all that the Philippian Christians had to be anxious about, but it was likely many of the same things you and I get anxious about: personal problems, family troubles, the decay of society, the threat of persecution, sickness, financial difficulties, uncertainty with work and employment. Our world today is far different, yet at the same time not much has changed.

But this isn’t just a grown-up problem. You’re never too old or too young to be anxious. This pandemic has revealed that. One of the biggest problems that continues through this time isn’t physical health but *mental* health. It was a problem before, but this time of fear, separation, and isolation has revealed its scope and increased it exponentially. My wife has told me multiple times that the biggest issue facing the pediatric units at the hospital wasn’t and isn’t covid, but attempted suicides. And medical studies are backing that up now, just how much *mental* damage covid - and all that has come with it - has done to people of all ages.

Add to that all the shenanigans going on in our culture, playing with people’s minds. Issues of identity and gender, who you are and who you should be, and can you even know? Can you be sure? And talk of all this as being *fluid*, ever-changing, so you can never be sure, never have a firm foundation.

People are anxious. *Almost all the time.* Anxious about matters of life and death. Anxious about who they are. Anxious about the future. And now add to all that the pressures and expectations of the holiday season! Being told to feel a certain way when they don’t. Told be jolly and they aren’t. Being filled with hopes and expectations, and then disappointed when those hopes and dreams aren’t fulfilled like they are in all the holiday movies. And so many think: *what’s wrong with me?*

No wonder so many are lost and confused and depressed. Maybe you’ve been there. Maybe you *are* there. Anxious, and yearning for peace.

Maybe like the disciples of John the Baptist who came to him one day, seemingly very

anxious about all that Jesus was doing while John was languishing in Herod's prison. Some think John was anxious, too. Maybe. But John doesn't seem like the type. He was bold and brash, calling the Pharisees who came out to the Jordan a *brood of vipers* (Matthew 3:7), fearlessly railing against King Herod and his sins, and very confident in Jesus, on whom he saw the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove (Matthew 3:16) and to whom he pointed and said, *Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world* (John 1:29)!

So I rather see John like a wise, old teacher, advising his students. They come to him anxious, breathless, questioning. And John, calmly, like one who has been through this before, points them to their answer. Go ask Him, he says. Go ask Him, *Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?* That is, are you the promised Messiah or not?

Their answer is in what Jesus did and had been doing. *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.* All these are things the prophets said the Messiah would do. But not just to hand out Messianic goodies on a chosen few, taking away the sting of sin here and there - these were just the prelude to the main thing: taking away the sin of the world on the cross. We tend to focus on the goodies, that's what we want. But Jesus - and John - are all about the main thing.

And you know, before John was in prison, while he was still baptizing at the Jordan, I'll bet there were people like the ones Jesus healed who came out to him to be baptized. I never really thought about it before, but of all those people who came out, surely not all were in good health. There must have been those who were sick, lame, blind, diseased, outcast . . . and they went out there for a healing greater than just that of the body. The healing of the soul. The forgiveness of sin they needed. And John was happy to give it.

But now that Jesus had come and begun His work, the forerunner's job was over. He had done it well. He had prepared the people. Now, it was time for him to move over, to retire. Jesus gives him high praise: *among those born of women none is greater than John.* Think about that. Not the Jews' great Father Abraham, not the great King David, not the great prophet Elijah, or Moses - no, the guy in prison! *None is greater than John.*

But it's that next line that really, then, jumps out: *Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.* Kinda puts things in perspective. That maybe the things in this world that we obsess about, the people and things we think so great, and that we want or want to be, aren't really so great after all. And can't give us what we need, what we're looking for. Can't give us that firm foundation we need to live a life of contentment and peace. A life where *we aren't anxious about anything.*

But that's exactly what Jesus had come to do. Give us that firm foundation we need to

live a life of contentment and peace. That we not be knocked around and swayed and become breathless and anxious when the next thing happens. And there's *always* a next thing. But instead know that your life is safe in Jesus. That you are among those greater than John! For by your baptism, you are a member of the kingdom of God, the family of Christ. Your sins have been washed away, which means they're not going to condemn you and they're not coming back to haunt you. And if your sins have been washed away, then death has also been taken care of, for the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23) - so while you'll die, even as Jesus died, you'll also rise to life again as He did. And live.

And all of that is sure, accomplished, done by Jesus and given to you. So our life now is kinda like this . . . Say there was one really great Christmas present you wanted, more than anything else, ever. And you *know*, for *certain*, that you're going to get it. That's it's been purchased, wrapped, and is sitting under the tree just waiting for you to unwrap it on Christmas morning. It might be hard for you to wait, but already now, waiting, you would be filled with joy knowing that the day is coming . . .

That's our life now as Christians. Our eternal life in the kingdom of God is purchased, wrapped, and just waiting for us to rise from the sleep of death on the Last Day to receive it. And while it might be hard to wait, and we might have bumps and troubles while we do, it is waiting for you. Guarded and kept for you by your Saviour.

Which changes how we live now. For the joy we have now, knowing the gift that is waiting for us, dwarfs all the trials and troubles satan can gin up and throw at us. And he's got a lot! And tries a lot! And at times, succeeds in pulling our attention away from Christ and His victory and drags us down into this anxiety causing world. But as Paul said, ***the Lord is at hand***, too. It's not God up there, far, far, away, and satan down here, fighting us. ***The Lord is at hand***. In flesh and blood. Flesh and blood that touched and healed many in the days of John, and His Body and Blood that touches and heals us today of our sins. And re-focuses us, and puts us back on the firm foundation we need. So that in this world of anxiety, change, challenge, and attack, we not be knocked around or knocked down, but ***rejoice!*** Rejoice even in the face of these things. ***Rejoicing always***, as Paul said, because the Day our gift is to be opened is drawing ever closer.

Even ol' John, stuck in prison. I don't think he was happy about being in prison! But happiness is different than joy. And you may not be happy, and maybe not feeling very jolly. But you're not great in the kingdom of God because you *feel* great, but because Jesus said you are. Feelings come and go, but the Word of Jesus stands forever.

I'm not sure how long John had been in prison when these things we heard about today took place, and John didn't know it, but he was now very close to receiving his gift and becoming even greater - when he would lose his head because King Herod lost his and made a foolish promise. And I'm not sure how close any of us are, or what prisons or troubles you are languishing in right now as you wait. But as we wait, ***the Lord is at***

hand. And not just for others, but for you. So ***let your requests be made known to God, prayers and supplication, with thanksgiving***. With the thanksgiving that re-focuses you away from the troubles and back onto Christ, His victory, and His gift.

And that thanksgiving isn't just something to come up with in your heart, something else for you to do! It is actually something very concrete. For the word for *thanksgiving* there is *eucharistias* - eucharist, which is one of the names given to the Lord's Supper. So Paul is calling us, in the midst of a world of anxiety, here. A place of peace. A place where we repent and receive the forgiveness we need. A place where we hear the assuring Word of God. A place where we pray together and for one another. And a place where we *eucharist* - give thanks for the gift of Jesus and at the same time receive Him, His life, and His peace.

So, ***rejoice in the Lord always? Do not be anxious about anything?*** That's not Paul telling us to do the impossible, but inviting us to a better way. To the life Jesus has for us. Which is why we lit the rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath today. It is the joy candle. The candle that reminds us that Advent is half over now and our gift is that much closer. So we will *eucharist* today, give thanks, and receive His gift here while we wait for the Day of the BIG unwrapping. No, not Christmas! Better!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.