

Advent III (RCL/B): "Cheerful No Matter What??"
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28
December 17, 2023
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

*16-17 Be cheerful no matter what; pray all the time; thank God no matter what happens.
(1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, The Message)*

Well, that sounds like great advice, but what are the chances **that's** going to happen?? I have no problem being cheerful when the sun is shining, my loved ones are healthy, worship attendance is good, financial giving is robust, and I'm on top of my to-do list. But when it's bitterly cold, the dogs drag dirt into the house a couple hours after the floors have been washed, it's lunch time and we've run out of sandwich bread, or I have a headache from the backlog of articles, sermons and reports to be written: then, "I'm not gonna lie," I am **not** cheerful.

The thought of **rejoicing** when the cat coughs up a furball onto the bedspread is even more remote -- no less the thought of **rejoicing** when I hear about Ukraine, Israel or Gaza in the news, read about the percentage of freshwater fish and songbirds that are in danger of extinction, or I learn that someone I love is in rehab because of addiction.

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How can St. Paul reasonably expect us or anyone to do that??

Thank God no matter **what** happens? Give thanks in **all** circumstances? Maybe a senior on a fixed income is strapped for cash and has to decide whether to buy food or medication. Maybe a biopsy turns up positive. Maybe you suffer a miscarriage. Maybe you're served with divorce papers, seemingly out of the blue. Maybe a friend or family member you trusted with all your heart betrays you. Maybe your job is outsourced. Maybe

your car is totaled. Thank God no matter **what** happens? Give thanks in **all** circumstances? Who **does** that?? Is St. Paul crazy??

But here's the thing: **we are** called to do that! St. Paul lays it out simply:

... for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess. 5:18b; NRSV)

This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live. (The Message)

The only sense I can make of it is: we're not called to give thanks **because** of all circumstances. We're called to give thanks **in** all circumstances. **By God's grace**, it is possible to assume a holy outlook on any situation and to put things in a divine perspective. It's not a Pollyanna perspective that denies reality. It's not putting on rose-colored glasses that blind us to the suffering of others. It's not somehow psychically anesthetizing ourselves to our true pain. It's holy remembrance that "God is **for** us," that God is faithful, that Jesus has promised, "I am with you always, to the end of time" (Matt. 28:20). When we were baptized the Holy Spirit became for us the unfailing spring of living water, Source of Heaven's strength, day in and day out, Giver of **love** that doesn't fade even when the beloved acts in a most unlovely way, of **hope** that endures through dark times, and of **faith**, unfaltering trust, that God keeps all of God's promises.

I'm never going to give thanks **because** 9/11 or Sandy or COVID occurred, but I can give thanks for God's presence in the midst of trial and for God's blessings in the midst of catastrophe, natural disaster, pandemic, death. I can acknowledge that in the midst of the suffering and devastation God is actively present and saving. Emmanuel, God-with-us, was at St. Paul's Chapel when faculty and students from the Jewish Theological Seminary arrived to offer respite to first responders after 9/11. They saw a sculpture hanging over the altar, the Ten Commandments engraved with a Hebrew inscription, and they said, "We

see you were expecting us!" Emmanuel, God-with-us, was present when firefighters laid the body of Fr. Michael Judge on that altar at St. Paul's; he had died after being struck by falling debris while anointing a dying firefighter. "Jesus wept" along with his brother firemen.

Sandy left several feet of sand in basements, left stranded pets on upper floors and left many homeless, but Emmanuel, God-with-us, was present in MOVE, the Manasquan Organization of Volunteer Efforts, neighbors who mobilized to help in every way possible. Our Furniture Bank and Linen & Kitchen Brigade exist, persist, thrive, 11 years later, serving veterans, single parents, the disabled, the suddenly-unemployed-because-of-health-problems, the suddenly-homeless-because-of-house-fires, brothers and sisters who are down-and-out for hundreds of reasons that God only knows. Thanks be to God for those who notice, care, act, mobilize to provide beds, couches, kitchen tables, plates and linens!

Can **you** think of any signs that Emmanuel, God-with-us, **was** with us during COVID lockdown and the worst of the pandemic? *****

When have we ever appreciated first responders, doctors, nurses, and hospital workers more? One of our church friends lives in Manhattan and every day at 7 p.m. she heard applause, pots banging, bells ringing, all sorts of affirmation for hospital workers all over the City. Also, we know technology isn't **always** a blessing, but livestream capability became a necessity once lockdown happened, and it's a gift we still enjoy. It keeps us connected with homebound friends and also with folks all over the country. Last week one of our young adults worshiped with us in person, and shared that she now lives in California but logs on to be with her Holy Trinity family from afar.

Of course, it's always **easier** in **hindsight** to identify God's Presence during crisis. But if we can focus on "*praying without ceasing*" in **ordinary** times, maybe we'll be more successful doing that in **extraordinary** times. "*Praying without ceasing*" obviously doesn't mean that we're on our knees with hands folded around the clock. It means that we offer our life as a prayer, whether we're at work or play, waking or sleeping. It means that we consciously look for God-incidences during the day, the breaking in of the Holy Spirit, in a moment of awe, through an unexpected sense of calm, in the opportunity to help someone, or realizing when we experience a flash of anger that we have a choice whether or not to weigh our words carefully, whether or not to lash out hurtfully.

Our Gospel this weekend says that John the Baptizer:

"came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light." (John 1:7-8)

That's **our** job, too! **We** are called to testify to the light, so that all might believe. Our witness of

- rejoicing always,
- praying without ceasing,
- giving thanks in all circumstances,

is a huge part of our testimony that the Light of the World has come, and the darkness has not yet and never shall overwhelm It. The God who created and redeemed us, the God who makes us holy, does not ask the impossible of us. To quote St. Paul, "*The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.*" (1 Thessalonians 5:24) Amen.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham

¹⁸This is the way God wants you who belong to Christ Jesus to live.

²³⁻²⁴ May God himself, the God who makes everything holy and whole, make you holy and whole, put you together—spirit, soul, and body—and keep you fit for the coming of our Master, Jesus Christ. The One who called you is completely dependable. If he said it, he'll do it!