

Rejoice in God's Peace

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-7

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

The Third Sunday of Advent

December 16, 2012

Today is *Gaudete* Sunday. The Latin word *gaudete* means joy. Always the third Sunday of Advent, *Gaudete* signifies that we are drawing near—in fact—we have passed the halfway point on our journey to Christmas. We can almost see Bethlehem if we train our eyes and squint. That's how close we are.

As early as the 5th century, Christians prepared for Christmas the way many still prepare for Easter: with a 40-day fast. Advent has since been shortened to four weeks, and *Gaudete* has been observed since the 10th century as a kind of "break fast." Often the third candle on an Advent wreath is pink, to signify the change in tone and mood for the day.

Here's how we will observe *Gaudete* this morning. From time to time during the sermon I will say the word: *Gaudete*. Tim will play a chord, and then we will sing the refrain, just the refrain, of "O Come, O Come, Emanuel." The words are, "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel."

Gaudete.

[Sung response: Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.]

Actually, for this particular Advent--our first Advent together--I had planned for us to rejoice our way right through the entire season! "Rejoice in God's Hope" was my sermon topic on the 1st Sunday of Advent. Last Sunday's sermon, "Rejoice in God's Righteousness," got us thinking about the refiner's fire and the fuller's soap. And it happened that today's topic was to be: "Rejoice in God's Peace."

Well. The worst incident of school gun violence in the history of our country happened less than 48 hours ago and has been the subject of non-stop news coverage ever since. It hangs in the air. Instead of rejoicing, should we not darken the Christmas tree, speak in hushed tones, and drape our worship space in black?

A case could easily be made for doing just that, but I believe it is better for us to carry on as we are, and for me to stay "on topic." Why? Because if we do not, the shooter gains even more ground.

I propose that we stay "on topic" and struggle together to find a way to "rejoice in God's peace" even under these circumstances. Why? Because God's peace is God's gift precisely *for* times such as these.

I propose that we stay "on topic" as an affirmation of our abiding faith in God whom we know best in the person and work of Jesus Christ. He is the Prince of Peace, and now more than ever it will help us to remind ourselves of that, so that we can stand publicly for the things that make for peace in our community and in our nation.

So, with eyes wide open, I ask you to work with me during this sermon to proclaim the Prince of Peace and rejoice in him as best we are able.

Gaudete.

[Sung response: Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.]

In Paul's letter to the Philippians he instructs the Philippians in the practical aspects of Christian living. He exhorts them to "rejoice in the Lord, always." And he promises that: "the peace of God which surpasses understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

Look at the choice of words, and especially at the verb *guard*. The peace of God... will *guard* your hearts and minds. The word *guard* in its original Greek is a military word, meaning to "keep sentry watch." Paul invites the Philippians-- who are being persecuted, remember,--to imagine the peace of God dressed up like so many security guards, on patrol out around the perimeter of the property, keeping them safe.

The startling piece of advice here is that we Christians trust the "peace of God" to guard us, and nothing else. The God of peace is our sole security. God's peace is our strength and our shield.

This doesn't mean that nothing bad will ever happen to us. It does mean that nothing bad will ever come from us. It does mean that in life and in death we belong to God.

Gaudete.

[Sung response: Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.]

How does placing our sole trust in the God of peace translate into everyday behavior? Paul has some advice on that, too.

First of all, he says, "let your gentleness be known to everyone" (Philippians 4:5). That's an interesting piece of advice for early Christians who didn't want to attract the attention of the powers-that-be. A persecuted minority group generally wants to attract as little attention as possible. But Paul tells them: "let your gentleness be known to everyone." Broadcast your gentleness. Go public with your special Christian qualities. Be seen and noticed for who you are.

The New Testament scholar William Loader points out that "The focus is outward. For the Lord in whom [Paul] wants them to rejoice is the one whose life reached out."¹

Victoria was a gentle, peaceful hero on Friday. I do not know Victoria's last name, but she was a beautiful, young, first grade teacher at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown. When she heard gunshots on Friday, she hid her children in the cabinets in her classroom. When the shooter came into her classroom, she told him that her children were in the gym. Her children, hidden in the cabinets, lived. She did not.

Her story is something to broadcast. It is a story we can help make known to everyone. There is so much to be sad about, but we can--and I believe we must--rejoice in Victoria's gentle, peaceful courage. Let us rejoice in one whose life reached out.

Gaudete.

[Sung response: Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.]

In addition to gentleness, Paul advises prayerfulness. And here I invite you to think of the word, *prayerfulness*, almost as if it had a hyphen in the middle of it: *prayer-fulness*.

When Paul describes what he considers to be the essence and the scope of prayer, here is what he says: "Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make your requests known to God" (Philippians 4:5). Notice the words "anything" and "everything". "Do not worry about *anything* but in *everything* make your requests known..."

Paul's idea of prayer is not narrow but wide. Anything and everything can go into a prayer, even the proverbial kitchen sink. Just read the psalms. Those psalmists rant and rave at God, they are so angry. And so can we.

Prayer-fulness means no holds barred. Let it rip. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Bring anything and everything--all 20 children and all 6 adults--and whatever else is troubling you--to God, in prayer, "with thanksgiving," making "your requests known..."

Prayer-fulness has the effect of emptying us. It's like taking out the garbage and the recycling. All of a sudden we have created all kinds of room for God to work with. We have room for other feelings, other interests, other people, new thoughts. We replace worrying with doing. By God's grace. We replace ranting and raving with determination, reconciliation, and hopefully, eventually, forgiveness.

What we are asked to do in prayerfulness is similar to what we are asked to do concerning gentleness: turn ourselves inside out. Focus outward. Live for others in peace. Like Victoria. Like Jesus.

Gaudete.

[Sung response: Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.]

The Nobel Peace Prize was given to President Obama a few years ago, before he'd really had a chance to do much to earn it, but in his acceptance speech, he identified four areas of work that he felt were vital to world peace: agreements among nations, strong institutions, support for human rights and investment in development.

"And yet" he went on to say, "I do not believe that we will have the will, or the staying power, to complete this work without something more – and that is the continued expansion of our moral imagination²."

Can God's peace ever overcome sinful human nature? Yes, it can. Can we do something to help bring that about? Yes, we can. Where do ordinary people go for "continued expansion of their moral imagination"? They go to church. It strikes me that what Obama was talking about happens best in a setting like this one.

The continued expansion of our moral imagination is a deeply religious matter. Our ethics and morals are spiritual at their core and they are shaped over time, in families and in communities, and they are hard to change once they have been formed. Our nation needs its churches.

And there is something else. I believe our nation needs to address gun violence through legislation.

According to one report³, in a single year, handguns killed:

- 48 people in Japan
- 8 people in Great Britain
- 34 people in Switzerland
- 52 people in Canada
- 58 people in Israel
- 21 people in Sweden
- 10,728 people in the United States

Just what needs to change is a matter of great debate. But the problem itself is not debatable.

Our country needs its churches, and our country needs us Christians to turn ourselves and our ways of relating inside out, to imagine peace, and to fight for it with the weaponry and tactics of the Christ child.

We live in a violent world, but God's peace passes understanding and will prevail.

Gaudete.

[Sung response: Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel.]

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Rev. Ruth Boling

¹William Loader. "First Thoughts on Year C Epistle Passages in the Lectionary," Advent 3.
wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au

²www.nobelprize.org

³Preacher's Note: Further research after this sermon was delivered indicate that these figures are outdated. For up-to-date figures on comparative gun violence, visit www.americanbar.org.