

## Advent Waiting Part III

### Philippians 4:1-7

I begin this morning with a story I have shared with some of you before. It's a conversation I had with a man I knew regarding a letter he received from a colleague of his. It wasn't just any letter, it was a Christmas letter! I think we are all familiar with Christmas letters. They can be wonderful things to receive at this time of year. They can catch you up on news about people you often haven't seen or heard from in months or even years. But the letter that my friend got was just too much for him to bear.

The letter from his colleague provided a tidy description of this ideal family to which he belonged. His daughter that year had graduated at the top of her class in an elite prep school. It gave the blueprints of their beautiful new home in Cape Cod. It gave an account of their unmatched vacation in the Andes; and went on to say how he had been able to run in the Boston marathon for the first time in his life. And there was an announcement that after an exhaustive study of their genealogy and further DNA testing, they could now prove they were related to royalty.

"Well," my friend said to me, "could you imagine if I had written a letter this year, what it would have said? 'My son was diagnosed with a behavioral disorder; when the hurricane season arrived, my little cottage by the sea washed out. My vacation was cancelled when my travel agent forgot to send in the deposit. I didn't run a marathon – I broke my leg. And by the way, the only famous relative I have is in prison doing time for a serious crime, so what can I say?' Where's the good news in all that!

I could sense that my colleague was not only angry, but sad, even frustrated by the letter he received. To him it was absurd to receive a letter filled with such self-promotion, especially when he considered his own year of struggle and loss. He began to question the value of his own life as he started to compare it to the achievements his friend had listed in that letter. He said, "Dale, I want to feel happy for him, but that letter just doesn't reflect reality for me! I don't think it reflects reality for a lot of people. That letter isn't bringing us closer, if you ask me it just drove us further apart. And more than that, when I compare what I have been through this past year, I start to ask myself, where are the blessings in my life? I'm a faithful guy, I go to church, I give to charity, I volunteer at the food bank. Where is God for me? I'm waiting for something good to happen...and it better happen soon!"

As I listened to my colleague I made a feeble attempt to console him. I acknowledged that the letter did seem a bit ridiculous and certainly didn't reflect the reality that most of us face in lives that are spent dealing with the mundane and struggling with our day to day challenges rather than dwelling on successes. But what hooked me more on the inside as I spoke with him, was the pain and the frustration he was experiencing and how these feelings were isolating him from not only his colleague, but moreover, God. He was in a lonely place, feeling cut off from the good things in life. He felt denied the blessings others around him were experiencing.

Our text this morning is also taken from a letter. It wasn't a Christmas letter, at least not in the way we have come to expect and imagine them. But then again, maybe this letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians was a more authentic Christmas letter. It contained a more authentic expression of the realities and adversities that we can face in this world and the importance of our Christian faith in the midst of these things. Paul after all wrote this letter while he was waiting in a Roman prison. A place where he most certainly separated from the ones he loved. A lonely place where he could easily feel cut off from the good things in life.

Roman prisons, weren't the most hospitable of places. If one found him or herself in a Roman prison, there was a good chance they would not make it out alive. In fact, earlier in this letter Paul alludes to an impending sense of death -how this imprisonment is much harsher than one he had previously experienced. One would expect that Paul would have had every reason to give up on any good things and just wait to die. It's easy to not feel so "blessed" when one finds oneself in a position such as Paul's.

In the letter, Paul does not hide, nor does he hide his struggles from the ones to whom his letter is addressed. There are places where he speaks of his anxiety, his suffering -his times of need. Paul also reaches out, take the time to name the struggles that he has shared with and the struggles that have been borne by the members of the Philippian community. Paul compares these struggles to those of the struggles Christ's himself endured in his life. For Paul, this is important. It is important as he says in verse 7 that our hearts and minds be guarded in Jesus Christ. Guarded by the peace of God that passes all understanding. It passes all understanding because it is a peace that comes to us not only when we have the good things...but it is a peace that comes to us even as we struggle, even as we wait for the good things to happen. It guards and protects us from the despair that can easily creep in.

You see, I believe that in life, especially in this world, we can lose our sense of peace when we no longer see the good things in our lives. It's easy to forget our present blessings when faced with day to day struggles. I believe it can drive a person to the edge. This is especially true in a world that puts great emphasis on achievement and success. So much of our lives can become an exercise in waiting for good things. We say things like, "I want the good things I see happening to others happen to me." or "I want to enjoy the good things I see others enjoying." It's easy to start feeling miserable and begin to say, "Where are my good things?" "When are good things going to happen to me?" They become the measure of life's value ...as if there is no value in the pain and the challenges and the suffering we sometimes... and not just sometimes....but a lot of the time...must endure. We tend to keep silent in regards to our sufferings, and they can isolate us even further in what it already a very isolating world.

In Christ God doesn't remain isolated, God displays right there publicly on a cross in Christ's own humanity. In Christ's birth, God doesn't hide these things. Being born in the midst of the animals, in the uncertainty of the night, to anxious first time parents, risking rejection in a world full of threats and fear. God does not hide or diminish what it takes to get to the good things -ultimately to that day of resurrection. If anything, God in Christ seeks to reveal the hidden blessing found in the midst of life's challenges and suffering which is the blessing of faith itself.

This was echoed in a story I recently read about a young man named Jacob Mosley. Back in 2010, following the housing collapse in the United States, Jacob, his four siblings and their mother ended up living in a homeless shelter for 21 months. To hear Jacob and his family describe it, the day they moved into the shelter was the worst day of their lives. Watching his mother struggle to keep them together, Jacob went out after school every day looking for jobs to help support his family. Eventually, he took a job caddying at a nearby golf club. Jacob knew nothing about golf, but diligently learned, carrying the caddy's manual with him and reading it every day for two years. Jacob also learned that as a caddy there was a possibility that he could win a scholarship that would pay for his college education. Jacob waited and prayed for something good to happen. Eventually, in 2011, the year he graduated from high school, the scholarship winners were announced. Jacob however, wasn't on the list. His grades weren't good enough and he was devastated.

Eventually Jacob got some help, got himself back together and with the assistance of grants and loans, was able to pay for his first year of college. He did so well that first year that he was

among the scholarship winners the following year. When Jacob learned he had been awarded a scholarship recipient, he wrote his mother, not by letter but by a text and said, "Today I am a blessed man." And his mother responded with a text of her own, not knowing what he was talking about that said, "Jacob Mosley you are a blessed man every day!"

Leave it to a mother to remind her son that regardless of the "good things" that there are blessings to be had every day in every moment. There are blessings to be received and good things to be counted. Some that are obvious and some that remain hidden even as we work and suffer and struggle and wait for something good to happen. This is that same faith and same spirit in which Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians. It is what makes Paul's letter a true Christmas letter. A letter he writes in the midst of his suffering, his isolation and captivity to say, "Rejoice in the Lord always...The Lord is near." Paul knew by faith of the good things, the nearness of God. While he waited in prison he was still blessed, even if others couldn't see it.

My friends, I hope that as we wait, that our faith in a long-suffering God will instill the same hope and peace, even as we wait for the good things to happen. Be it while you suffer through a sermon and wait for the choir to sing a wonderful cantata, be it while you make your Christmas preparations and await the good things of Christmas day...and more importantly, be it at any moment or through any trial in life, when the good things we wait for and long for seem so far away or out of reach. May we know the blessings in this life, knowing that the Lord is near, that there are good things in our midst. For at Christmas God sends each of us a letter, the Word of God made flesh, the Christ who has shown us that even and especially in the darkest places, there is a blessing and a promise of good things.