

“Practicing the Presence of God”

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

December 11, 2011

Third Sunday of Advent

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Last Sunday afternoon Debra and I attended Theatre Workshop’s performance of the musical “*Oliver!*” based on Charles Dickens’ novel *Oliver Twist*. We were sitting in Bennett Hall along with 140 other people awaiting the start of the performance. The house lights were burning brightly, people were flooding into the theater, crowding the aisles, looking for their seats. The room was full of loud chatter and laughter. It was the noisy chaos that occurs before the start of a performance.

Suddenly the house lights dimmed. A hush came over the theater. The crowd grew silent. The room was dark except for the tiny lamp on the piano above the musical score. Our music director, Robby Behrman, sat at the piano waiting. What a strange and wonderful moment. It reminded me of a passage in Frederick Buechner:

“The house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise. In the orchestra pit, the violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton. . . . The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.”¹

You know that moment, don’t you? The wedding party and minister are all standing at the front of the church waiting. The music stops. The minister lifts her hands. Everyone stands and turns facing the back of the sanctuary, awaiting the bride. The room hushed, the music begins again. The door opens and the bride appears. You know that moment, don’t you? That moment of anticipation.

You’re in a stadium awaiting the start of the big game. Over the din of the crowd comes the announcer’s voice, “Please stand for our national anthem.” People rise, hats come off, the crowd is silenced. You feel the beating of your heart. What a strange and wonderful moment—suspended in time. It’s true. The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens.

In the life of the church, Advent is a moment just like that. Advent is the season of waiting for Christmas. Advent is that moment of anticipation, when the house lights go off, and the footlights come on, the conductor’s baton is raised, even the chattiest stop chattering, and we wait in the darkness for the curtain to rise. Our souls wait for the Lord of Christmas. The extraordinary thing that is about to happen—Christmas—is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens—Advent.

On this third Sunday of Advent we light the Advent candle of Joy and we hear the words of Paul from his first Letter to the Thessalonians: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. . . .” Paul was writing to the church in Thessalonica speaking of how Christians should live between Jesus’ first coming in Bethlehem, and the

promise of Jesus' Second Coming at the end of time. For centuries the church has read these words during Advent as a description of what it means to live the Christian life while we wait for God.

“Rejoice...pray...give thanks....don’t quench the Spirit....test everything....hold fast to the good...abstain from evil.” In this passage there are eight staccato-like verbs exhorting us to faithful living. It is a powerful call to live a joyful life of prayer and gratitude, embracing what is good and rejecting what is evil. The words speak across the centuries to the church and believers in every age, calling us to a life of wholeness. But what is also intriguing about this passage are the modifiers that accompany the verbs: “Rejoice *always*...Pray *without ceasing*...Give thanks in *all circumstances*....Test *everything*.... Abstain from *every* evil... May the God of peace sanctify you *entirely* in spirit, soul, and body.”

Always, without ceasing, in everything, entirely.... Paul is talking about a life wholly oriented toward God. Paul is describing a life in which we recognize that every day, in every decision, every circumstance, we’re called to be aware of the reality of God. Rejoicing, prayer, and thanksgiving are not just Sunday activities. They are to be part of all of life—*always, without ceasing, in all circumstances*.

New Testament scholar Charles Cousar says Paul is reminding us here that “life cannot be simply divided into the God-related and non-God-related dimensions,” the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the non-spiritual. All of life is to be lived in response to God’s presence. “Writing checks, marking ballots in the voting booth, relating to family members in the home, making business decisions”—as well as worship—are all things God cares about. They are all places where we may experience God’s presence at any moment. We are called to be God’s people in all of life by discerning the good and holding fast to it, while turning away from that which is not God’s will and purpose for us.²

Paul is saying that all of life is to be lived in response to the gospel—the good news of the kingdom of God—the new thing God has done in Jesus Christ.

That means that any moment may become a God moment—an “Advent moment” when God makes his presence known. Any moment may become like that moment when the house lights go off and the footlights come on, a hush of silence comes over the room, and you can feel the beating of your heart.

But there’s a problem. Our tendency is to divide life into the sacred and secular, the spiritual and non-spiritual, things that are God-related and things that are not God-related. For many people God is an intellectual idea, an abstract notion, not a living presence whom we experience in daily life.

Pastor and writer Graham Standish calls this the problem of “rational functionalism.” Standish says many churches, and people in them, especially in our mainline denominations, simply aren’t open to experiencing or encountering God as a tangible presence. God becomes a rational, intellectual idea rather than a living reality here and now. Sermons become academic lectures or exercises largely cerebral in nature, aimed at

understanding the idea of God from a rational point of view. Faith is about solving the problem of God and the Bible, rather than leading and guiding people to a meaningful encounter with the living God in their midst.³

And yet, biblical faith proclaims from beginning to end that God is actively present and at work in this world, in our lives, and in the church. In his book *Becoming a Blessed Church* Graham Standish writes that becoming a church with spiritual vitality means being open to God's active grace and power at work in our midst. It means being aware of the Holy Spirit at work among God's people and having a lively sense of Christ's presence in our midst.

Churches like this, Standish says, are awake, aware, and alive. They are awake to what Christ is doing among them. They're aware of God's presence in the music, prayers, sermons, and ministry of the church. They have "Aha!" moments. They talk about how God is at work in their lives and what God is saying to them through Scripture. They talk about how God is calling them to love others and reach out to those who are suffering and in need. Becoming awake, aware, and alive to Christ's presence means that such churches have a new energy and vitality in their mission and ministry to the world.⁴

So how do we become more open and aware of God's presence? For centuries the history of Christian spirituality has given us many ways to nurture a deeper awareness of God. We call them "spiritual disciplines." They include many different forms of prayer, devotional reading, study, and things like journaling, meditation, silence, solitude, and spiritual direction. The list of these spiritual practices is long, but they all have as their goal opening ourselves to a more personal experience of God. In one way or another they are about "*practicing the presence of God.*"

That's a phrase that comes from an obscure 17th century French monk known as Brother Lawrence. Brother Lawrence struggled with the idea of prayer. Books on the spiritual life confused him. "For many years I was bothered by the thought that I was a failure at prayer," he wrote. "Then one day I realized I would always be a failure at prayer; and I've gotten along much better since then."

So Brother Lawrence resolved to give himself to a continual awareness of God's presence in the midst of everyday activities. As he worked in the monastery kitchen peeling potatoes or in the shoe shop cobbling shoes, he began carrying on a constant conversation with God in all matters great and small. He cultivated what he called a "simple attentiveness and loving gaze upon God." He carried on a "silent conversation with God" throughout his day, no matter where he was or what he was doing. By doing so, he discovered a profound joy that transformed his life.

Brother Lawrence wrote about this experience, asking that his writing never be shared with anyone. But his notes and letters were later published in a book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*. The book is a spiritual classic. For Brother Lawrence the Christian life became not simply a life of going to church, saying set prayers, and doing the liturgy and rituals of worship. The Christian life and prayer became for him a way of living—of becoming aware and alive to God's presence no matter where one is or what one is doing.⁵

This continual openness to God's presence is, I think, what Paul means when he says, "Rejoice *always*, pray *without ceasing*, give thanks *in all circumstances*." Paul is talking about a life in which we practice the presence of God, experience every moment as a gift from God, and stay alive to God.

Paul ends the passage with a prayer and a promise. The prayer for his readers is for wholeness: "May the God of peace sanctify you entirely—make you holy and whole in spirit, soul, and body, and keep you sound, pure, and blameless at the coming of the Lord." The prayer is that they may be whole, complete in every good work and way.

But with the prayer comes a promise. It's not up to the Thessalonians to make themselves whole. God will do this. "The One who calls you is faithful, and he will do this." The good news is that God is the One who will bring us and our lives in him to wholeness. This wholeness is a gift from God, not something we can do on our own.

So we live from moment to moment in God's presence. Here we are, preparing for Christmas. Christmas trees, lights, wreaths brighten our homes and give light and warmth to winter's darkness. The glow of candlelight is everywhere, and the sounds of music fill the air. With gatherings of family and friends we prepare again to celebrate the birth of Jesus.

On this Advent Sunday, and every day of our lives, we live in that moment of anticipation when "the house lights go off and the footlights come on. Even the chattiest stop chattering as they wait in darkness for the curtain to rise. The violin bows are poised. The conductor has raised his baton. . . . The extraordinary thing that is about to happen is matched only by the extraordinary moment just before it happens."

You never know when and where God will show up next. So watch. Wait in the hushed silence of your life. Stay awake, alive to God's presence. God comes. God always does.

Notes

¹Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988), pp. 2-3.

²Charles Cousar in *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV, Year B* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), p. 27.

³N. Graham Standish, "Rational Functionalism," *Alban Weekly*, December 5, 2011. *Alban Weekly* is an online publication of the Alban Institute. See www.alban.org. The article is archived at <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=9828>.

⁴N. Graham Standish, *Becoming a Blessed Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2005), pp. 74-77.

⁵Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. John J. Delaney (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 1977).