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Philippians 4,4-9

Advent 4 — 20 December 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the Epistle lesson from Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians, which was read earlier:

The Lord is near.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: Can something be near and far away?

We know that Christmas Eve is only four days away. For many of us, that is the time when we go home from church and unwrap our Christmas presents. For others, it will be either before or after church on Christmas morning. There is no right or wrong here. It is a matter of custom, of what we have grown up with. Christmas is near.

But if we ask a small child, it will seem as if Christmas Eve or Christmas morning is far away. A small child wants Christmas to come now. To wait seems forever. For a small child, Christmas is far away.

But if we think about Christmas, let us think about the first Christmas, the birth of Jesus. Is that Christmas near to us or far away? It has been a bit less than 2,000 years since God's love overflowed and His Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, was born like you and I to begin His work of buying us back from sin. Is Jesus' birth near, or is it far away?

Indeed, we can go beyond His birth and think not only about His crucifixion and resurrection, but also about His ascension into heaven, where He is now seated at the right hand of the Father. He said He will come again. If we think about all this, is Jesus near or is He far away?

Paul Has some Good News for us, and it is the theme of today's sermon: "**The Lord Is Near!**" I'll develop this topic in three parts:

1) Jesus Is Near Us In His Birth

2) Jesus Is Near Us In His Forgiveness; and,

3) Jesus Is Near Us To Give Us Peace

1) Jesus Is Near Us In His Birth. For many people, the hustle and bustle of the season overwhelms, and it seems as if Jesus gets pushed to the side or even out of the picture – maybe even buried amidst all the torn up wrapping paper. Even Christians get overwhelmed by all the preparations. For others, unfortunately, the season has little if anything to do with Jesus. At best, for them, Jesus becomes either an afterthought or is completely meaningless.

Christians can be caught up in the preparations for the season. There may be travel plans, either going to relatives or having relatives and friends come. There is the need to decorate, and sometimes over-decorate. There are cards to send and to receive. There is shopping to do. There are gifts to buy and wrap. And unless you are shopping by Internet, there are crowds with which to contend and parking spaces to find. There is baking to prepare. Even pastors have to prepare more than usual.

With all that preparation, it is sometimes easy to overlook the fact that while all of these preparations are fine, they really do not help us to prepare for Jesus' birth. They help us to celebrate with family and friends, but these preparations do not of themselves take us closer to Jesus' birth. For some, these preparations may take them away from Jesus' birth and make Him seem far away.

Jesus only seems far away in His birth when we either forget or do not pay enough attention to the reason for His coming. The reason is there in plain sight, because it has to do with His name.

He came to save us from our sins. On separate occasions, this is what the angel said to Joseph as well as to Mary: “You shall call His name Jesus, for it is He Who will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1,21; Luke 1,31).

He was born to share our weaknesses; to be like us in all things. He was born to assure us that we do not have a God Who is far away, far either in time or in space. But in Jesus we see someone who was tempted in every way that we are so that He would be able to care for us and help us. But yet from the very beginning, He was without sin (Hebrews 2,14ff; 4,15).

It is the burden of our sin that hangs over the manger. Even though with the birth of Jesus, God has provided a Savior to rescue us from our old enemies – sin, death, and the power of the devil – some find this so disturbing that they either consciously or unconsciously reject the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child.

In stores and on TV, most greetings are generic: “Happy Holidays” or “Seasons Greetings.” The references to “Merry Christmas” are becoming increasingly rare.

In *Time* magazine of a few years ago, the cover story told about Jesus’ birth. The problem was that it mostly and prominently repeated all the higher critical points of view so that the reader is left with a mish-mash of fable and myth, rather than the story of God breaking into history on a divine mission of rescue. In that *Time* magazine, Jesus loses His divinity and is reduced only to a man like us, only a good teacher – certainly no Savior. But with this rejection is also the rejection of our burden of sin and the need for rescue.

TV talk show host Larry King was once asked: “If you could

choose anyone in history to interview, whom would you choose?” King, a liberal Jew, replied the He would like to interview Jesus to learn if He was really born of a virgin. King realized that a positive answer would change all of humanity’s view of not only who we are, but also why Jesus had to come (adapted from *Meditations*, 17 December 2004: 22)

To really focus on the Jesus, the Christ in Christmas, is also to focus on our sin. It is to focus on our failings which made God send His Son to rescue us. It is to repent, and because God has turned to us in love, we turn to Him and see that:

2) Jesus Is Near Us In His Forgiveness. That work of forgiveness began before the foundation of the world. The work of salvation took on flesh in Mary’s womb and was born in a manger in Bethlehem. Jesus was conceived and born as the Son of God (Luke 1,35).

As the Son of God, Jesus was true God and true man. But as true man, He hid His divinity. He humbled Himself to be born of a woman and live as we live.

But while we live with the burden of sin, ever walking toward the grave, He lived without sin. He did not walk toward the grave to die because of His sins, but He walked toward the Cross to die for our sins.

On the Cross, the consequences of His humanity were shown in the agony of death itself. But much more than just dying, He took with Him the burden of our sin upon Himself. He had not deserved to die, but died for us. He took upon Himself the burden of our separation from God. It was our sin which separated Him from His heavenly Father on that Cross. It was our sin that made God seem so far away, as the heavens closed and the sky darkened and death approached.

But death did not swallow up Jesus as the payment for His sin. For when He died the barrier of sin and death which would separate us from God was shattered. He rose on the third day to show us that in His rising from the dead God is near. On account of His humanity He died

for our sins and on account of His divinity that sacrifice which He made for sin is good for all time for all people.

Jesus, the Son of God, is near us in the forgiveness which He has won for us. And as He lives forever, so in forgiveness is He near to us as well.

This is why Paul could tell the Philipians and us to rejoice, the Lord is near!

When Paul wrote to the Philipians he was in Rome in prison and awaiting trial (1,12ff). He wrote to a congregation that was beset by false teachers and strife (3,3), with “grumbling and disputing” (2,14). Yet in the midst of turmoil, Paul could rejoice.

This rejoicing was not grounded in outward circumstance but in the inward assurance that in forgiveness Jesus is always near.

This is the joy that the man or woman who is forgiven always is close to God. Of Himself, Jesus said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12,32). How does He draw us close to Him? Paul tells us:

But now in Christ Jesus, you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2,13)

This is the forgiveness made sure by Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross. This is the certain hope upon which Paul and all other Christians may call when in any distress. This is the hope which is renewed when we confess our sins, when we hear His Word, when we have had our sins washed away in Holy Baptism, when He shares with us His true Body and Blood. These Means of Grace tell us and assure us Christ is always near to forgive, to comfort, and to restore.

Jesus has drawn near to us so that we can bring our concerns and joys to Him in prayer. He personally invites us to come to the Father’s

throne in His name. These are the specific requests we have and are to be offered in thanksgiving. Here we can leave our anxieties at the foot of the Cross, confident that we have been heard by Him Who lovingly invites us, “Come unto Me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11,28).

This is the rest given to us in His forgiveness. He is near to us in His birth, in His forgiveness and also:

3) Jesus Is Near Us To Give Us Peace. When Paul says that God’s peace will guard our hearts and minds his readers knew to what he was referring. Philippi was a Roman town and as such was guarded by a Roman garrison. Roman soldiers guarded the town from outside enemies and kept order within the town. The Romans were very good at keeping the peace.

In the same way, God’s peace, shown to us in Christ, will keep our hearts and minds guarded against internal doubts and the external attacks by our old enemy, the devil. This peace is always near.

To the Ephesians, Paul writes:

But now in Christ Jesus, you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For Jesus Himself is our peace, who made [Jews and Gentiles] into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Him He might make the two one, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the Cross, in Himself having put to death the enmity. (Ephesians 2,13-16)

Peace to God is always near in Jesus. On the Cross He broke the condemnation of the Law. The Law and its judgment against sin separated all from God and also Jew from Gentile. As Jesus’ body was broken so was that condemnation. What stands in the place of

condemnation and separation? Forgiveness and Peace!

Apart from Christ people have no peace with God. But the forgiveness on which peace is grounded begins in the manger. God draws near to humanity in the manger and on the Cross – and in Jesus He is committed to staying near.

This is why Paul says that strife with the Philippian congregation is to be resolved in Christ. He made peace for us so we can live in peace with one another.

This is the peace that is grounded in His Word, so that we may be protected from false teachess, and as Paul says, not trouble ourselves with them and their teachings but “mark and avoid them” (Romans 16,17).

This is the peace of which the angels on the first Christmas sang aloud to the shepherds:

Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace among men with whom He is well pleased. (Luke 2,14)

Who are they with whom God is well pleased? Is He well pleased with people in general? No. He is well pleased with people on account of His Son.

This is the peace which Jesus gives us. After His resurrection He appeared to His disciples and said:

Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me, so I send you....
Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have ben retained. (John 20,22-23)

God’s peace in Jesus is always associated with forgiveness. The forgiven are forgiving, and the unforgiven are unforgiving.

So Paul can urge his readers and us to be as gentle to others as Jesus is gentle to us. In the busyness of Christmas, be gentle. Be gentle with everyone in the congregation. Be gentle with the clerks in the store. Be gentle with those who do not respond to cards. Be gentle with the relatives who forget to call or call late. Even be gentle with the unbelievers, who at best think that Christmas is only about lights and Santa. And if our gentleness is frayed because of the pressure of the season, relax and repent. Let the peace of Christ be renewed in you. The Lord is indeed near.

And as to when He will come again, the Lord is also near. Perhaps nearer than we think. He is near not only in our homes in our devotions but near every Sunday in His Word. He is near also in His coming again in power. He is near to us in time and space.

Conclusion. Even in the busiest time of the year, Christmas, Jesus is always near. He is near in the cradle to assure us of His humanity. He is near to us in the Cross to assure us of His forgiveness. In His forgiveness we can always be sure that we may “cast all our cares on Him, for He cares for us” (1 Peter 5,7). He is near to us in the peace He gives us to guard us and share with others the forgiving gentleness He has first shared with us. Take heart; the Lord is near! Amen.

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

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