

Isaiah 12:2-6 (New Revised Standard Version)

Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation. And you will say in that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the nations; proclaim that his name is exalted. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth. Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

Philippians 4:1, 4-8 (New Revised Standard Version)

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Today, we are already celebrating the second Sunday of Advent.

We're already well on our way, preparing for the birth of Jesus...

... busy getting ready for Christmas.

But how are we supposed to get ready for Christmas?

And what does it mean for a Christian to be preparing for Christmas?

When I lived in VA Beach, I remember that there was a radio station that played nothing but Christmas music from Thanksgiving on. The idea was to get their listeners into the Christmas spirit & mood.

So, are you listening to enough of the right kind of music, to be ready for Christmas -- to get into the right festive mood?

Are you preparing and are you making ready for Christmas?

If you are not ready and not in the mood for Christmas celebration, if you're not feeling bubbly all over with the joy of the season, what are you going to do about it?

Surely there is something we can do or buy or decorate to capture, enable or produce some Christmas spirit.

It is what's expected, that is what we do this time of year.

Even folks with no religious inclination or relationship with God, often enthusiastically join in decorating & celebrating Christmas.

But is that what God wants? *for Christmas, for Christians?*

Surely, preparing for Christmas is far more than all the busyness, more than all that we see in the world going on around us, more than just having the good will of a holiday spirit, or trying to manufacture a picture-perfect holiday.

Our culture has been seduced away from the true meaning of Christmas, and human depravity has corrupted and glittered its significance, the mercy & grace of the Lord coming to transform the lives of those whom the Lord loves and seeks to heal and bless.

When the passage we heard read from Isaiah was written, the people were still suffering and struggling with exile,

which they understood to be a just consequence for having rejected and turned aside from the ways & good of the Lord.

But in these verses the prophet has shifted to Good News and hope, because God has not abandoned them, but will forgive, and restore. Now there is the possibility of authentic peace with God, to live within God's will and desire to love and bless us.

This is the promise and the Good News, offering true peace and hope, that despite their terrible sin, losses, defeats and troubles God is still there to accomplish great and wonderful things, and promises that the best is yet to come.

Therefore, Isaiah writes about true hope and God's promises that will be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus, vs. 2, 5-6

Surely **God is my salvation**; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. Sing praises to the Lord, for he has done gloriously; let this be known in all the earth... for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.

In a similar vein, to the Philippian Christians, Paul was also writing about the coming of Jesus.

The apostle is writing from a terrible place of suffering as a prisoner of Rome under the threat of execution, vs. 1, 5-7,

The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And **the peace of God**, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

As a pastor, I have observed that when trouble or crisis strikes, that some people will remain crushed and many become embittered, while others manage to endure with **truly amazing grace, and with unimaginable faith, courage and strength**.

And it isn't determined by the severity of their loss or situation, as much as it is, a reflection of their heart, trust and attitude.

I see folks who at the least little thing will make crazy & fall apart, **while others, somehow withstand unbelievable troubles and still maintain an amazing sense of faith and peace**.

This is in no way about a false or blind refusal to face reality, and Paul is not saying smile anyway and just try to be happy.

Paul is saying that because the Lord is near and we know it, because of who God is, God's promises and gracious deeds, the coming of Christ can overcome our anxiety, panic & fear.

Paul's sense of peace is derived through his assurance from God that nothing in all of creation can ever separate us from the love of God through Christ Jesus our Lord, **for what really matters, is that we belong to God!**

Actually, the response that Paul is describing, is a bold and defiant peace, despite any external circumstances, because even amid our worst calamity or disappointment, by faith, we know that God's love **will sustain & will support us through whatever comes our way**.

Trusting in God's gracious and loving promise of the kingdom and eternal life that awaits us, means that we can endure with courage and strength, because by faith God's Holy Spirit brings us through.

Following Paul's example of peace despite a prison cell, vs. 8,

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

That is Paul's formula and recipe for Christmas hope and peace.

Peace comes from living within a righteous relationship with God,
as God intends and desires for us, as God's gracious gift
we receive with the coming of Jesus Christ into our lives

and to miss the peace of Christmas is to miss the point of Christmas.

I cannot explain it, but this I know and I promise that it's true,

**that if we will focus our trust, attention and attitude
upon recognizing glimpses of God's love and grace
so that we can thank, honor and praise the Lord,**

then surely the gift of peace will overtake us.

**God is love. That is who the Lord is, and he chooses to derive
great delight from loving, healing & saving the people he's created.**

By choice God sees that there is more good in us to love
than we could ever suppose, imagine, expect or believe.

The point is, in the ordinary of life where God has placed you,

how does your faith inform how you love and how you do your job,
and how you relate to other people God has placed in your life?

i.e. how is God's grace making a difference in my life?

**It's not so much about grand actions or great heroic deeds,
but it's simply living into the Kingdom, right where we are,
in the ordinary of life where we can make a real difference,
if we will look for opportunities to be honest, kind and merciful
with caring acts of grace which even we ordinary folks can do.**

Our call is to prepare ourselves, heart and soul, to receive Jesus,
to prepare for Christmas blessings, spiritually and biblically,
to examine with care, our inside - our innermost core,
rather than just hanging a little more tinsel.

The good and blessings that the Lord God desires and intends for us
are part of a life-long process of transforming us and our lives,
as God's grace, healing and love accomplishes God's purpose in us,
which isn't about our own efforts toward faith & righteousness.

**The purpose and final goal is to heal my sinful and selfish nature,
and be transformed toward the one the Lord created me to become.**

Christmas celebrates that same life-changing power, the truth
that in Jesus Christ, God came and became human flesh,
or as Eugene Peterson describes it,
"in Jesus, God came to live in our neighborhood."

When I ran a small business with a number of retail stores,
sometimes, things would get a bit sloppy and careless,

not quite as polite and attentive to customers as I wanted,
the store itself not quite as clean and neat as I insisted
& somehow the fervor for excellence sometimes got a bit dull.

So, I would call for a store meeting and bring in all the employees,
and we'd talk about our goals, purpose, how things were going,
and some possible changes in our operations and attitudes.

And those meetings always ended with a clearer sense of direction,
and with that renewed motivation, things would always improve.

I don't believe people really intend to be careless or complacent,
but that it just sort of sneaks up on us quietly and gradually.

Sometimes we slip into the comfortable rut of an easy routine,
toward a downward spiral of self-defeating comfort & complacency.

Advent offers us a similar opportunity to examine and assess
for any such destructive or soul defeating downward spiral
toward a complacent, comfortable compromise in our spiritual lives.

Like those store meetings, it's a good time, an opportunity
to reflect on our faith and our relationship with God,
and perhaps look for any obstacles to God's work in our lives.

**The truth and heart of the Christmas story is to celebrate that
God's infinite, beyond all reason, abiding and steadfast love,
shines Light into our darkness and dreary places,
and that brings healing; hope, peace, love and joy.**

**And when we begin to accept and trust that the Good News is true,
and when we begin to experience that truth for ourselves
of how much God really does love us, even just as we are,
that becomes the most significant fact of truth in our lives
which can reorient everything about how we choose to live,**

which as Paul points out, leads to, vs. 7,

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

As we are moving into and through the Advent season this year,
I want it to be authentic & meaningful, so I'm focusing on 3 things:

1st I want to know this God who loves me, better than I do now.
**and because God has promised us all throughout Scripture,
I most fervently believe God is waiting eagerly, for us to ask.**
Yes, God does want us to know him, and is waiting to show us his love.

2nd I want to explore and carefully self-examine to see,
if there are any obstacles blocking or standing in the way,
anything that might be limiting or restricting my peace,
and holding me back from God's intention for me to walk with him.

3rd I want to live a more peace-filled, joyful and grateful life,
and I believe that is what the Lord my God who does love me,
who intends and desires and has promised to me, Jer. 29:12-14,
*When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you
seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord. ... For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who
searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Matt 7:8)*

Our call, is to examine our lives and everything about our living,
our values, our priorities, our behavior, the words we speak,
our relationships & attitude, our integrity, our walk with God,
our commitments and our use of time and resources ...

... and if we're not headed toward God and becoming more Christ-like,
then we need to turn around and head back ----
and don't keep going further from where we want to end up.

That means,
whatever our circumstance or situation in life or the world,
God still delights that we are his, always welcoming us home...

... and the truth is, God still loves us and is with us and is for us,
which describes exactly what God did for us at Bethlehem,
God in the flesh, born into our world to be here among us-
- and that is the point and the true message of Advent and Christmas.

As the prophet Isaiah wrote, vs. 2

*Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my
might; he has become my salvation.*

During Advent this year I am focusing on a challenging meditation
that calls for a day of living totally committed and faithful to God,
and perhaps you'll want to consider joining me in this.

One day, Just one day.

If I could present to my God, Just one day of pure intention
of faithful purpose of loving heart of prayerful actions.

Just one day, of total commitment

of untarnished speech of unselfish acts of total concentration.

Just one day, lacking weakness

lacking jealousy lacking self-absorption lacking foolishness.

Just one day, One day If I could present to my God, Just one day.