

3 Advent 2003  
"Take Heart The Lord is Near"  
The Rev. Thomas W Simmons IV

These past few weeks have been real doozies! It seems all the pastoral care problems that we haven't had to deal with over the past year have been saved up for THIS month. I have a list of over a dozen people and families facing illness, death, financial crisis, troubled marriages and troubled pregnancies. All at once! And now I'm among the casualties. I learned this week that I have a hernia - so add me to the list, too.

**Life is tough, isn't it?** It's not for the faint of heart. You have to endure suffering, things you don't want, things you don't expect. Are you dealing with trouble in your life or in the lives the people you care about? Well join the crowd.

So how do you deal with it? For many people, when suffering comes they have little more than themselves to count on, or their friends and family or modern medical technology. You just stoically endure it and hope it all turns out OK. But that's not really enough, is it?

Our lessons this morning show us that in the midst of suffering there's something MORE we can count on. It's the presence of God. **They preach a simple Advent message: God is near.** They tell us what that means in regard to our suffering.

Zephaniah brings good news of God's presence to Israel in exile in Babylon, which has been a recurring theme recently in the Old Testament lessons. Look how Zephaniah describes it. He refers to God's judgments against Israel, about their enemies, about the disaster that has befallen them, the fear and weakness they feel, the reproach they bear, their oppression, lameness and shame. They are outcast.

In situations like this, whole nations, tribes and people groups were assimilated and simply disappeared. But that didn't happen to Israel. If it had we would probably have never heard of Israel except in classes on the history of the Ancient Near East. But Israel survived. Why?

Zephaniah tells us: God was with them. "The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst...The Lord your God is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory." That's nice, isn't it? That must have been music to their ears, "chicken soup for the exiled Israelite soul." God is present and he's going to turn it all around. He rescued and restored them. He removed the disaster from them and gathered them up and brought them home.

Israel's example gives us insight into our own suffering. Their suffering was just as bad and in many ways worse than our suffering. We have it easy! They were

almost annihilated! But they survived because God was in their midst. The same promises apply to you and me today and tomorrow. Remember them:

"Do not fear, O Zion; do not let your hands grow weak. The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival. I will remove disaster from you, so that you will not bear reproach for it. I will deal with all your oppressors at that time. And I will save the lame and gather the outcast, and I will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth."

Basic to this is the realization that **I am not alone. I am not isolated.** There is real hope for me, despite my sad circumstances. On that basis we pray, "Hear me. Help me. Give me strength. Show me what to do." All this help is yours if you can just trust God, if you can just perceive and count on his presence. He's WITH you.

Paul says much the same thing in our Epistle lesson. Like Zephaniah he declares to the Christians in Philippi, "The Lord is near!" Paul sees three ways that should impact how they think and feel in the midst of suffering. He basically tells them **how to think and feel.**

**First he tells us to be happy.** "Rejoice in the Lord always. *Again* I will say, REJOICE!" Can you hear his insistent urgency? Zephaniah said basically the same thing. "Rejoice and exult O daughter Jerusalem, the Lord is in your midst."

Yes, I know it's hard when so much isn't going the way you wanted it. There are a lot of things out there to crush our buzz, kill our joy and make us sigh and feel depressed and despairing. But believe it or not, **there's more to life** than our lousy circumstances and bad fortune.

**We don't get to choose** our lot in life, but we do choose how to respond. And rejoicing is a choice, a decision to notice and find joy and delight and gratitude in the little gifts that God gives us that we often don't notice in our self-pity, our anxious rush and efforts to control the world around us. Jesus Christ is in our midst. He has suffered in every way like us and with us and in him we truly have something to rejoice in and celebrate.

**Next, Paul tells us to stop worrying.** "Do not worry about anything." Most of us are pretty good at worrying. Some have perfected it to a fine art. There is much to worry about, because we live in a perilous and unpredictable world with many threats to our health, our financial well being and relationships, our children and reputation and our general happiness.

Paul tells us that instead of worrying - for all the good THAT does - we should pray. Lift your eyes from your anxiety and offer your fear to God. Praise him.

Thank him. Make your request known to him, in Jesus' name. He's waiting to hear from you. You see is at work in the world, in great things and small. He is intimately involved in your life, too. And he is in control.

The problem is, though we give lip service to this fact, we often live as though it weren't true. **We are "practical atheists" in many compartments of our lives.** "We believe in God the Father Almighty," but we often forget that when we struggle with the practical issues, anxieties and pressures of life.

We tend to assume we are in control and that it all depends on us, which leaves us biting our nails with worry. Prayer not only calls on the power of Father Almighty. It also acknowledges that **God is God, and I am not.** And that's so important to our mental, spiritual and relational health.

***The last thing Paul tells us is how to think.*** He says, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable...think about these things."

What fills your mind shapes your life. As a man thinks, so shall he be. The things you fear, the things you hate the things you are obsessed and controlled by all exercise their power in your thoughts. It is power that you give to them, by letting them crowd your thought life. What evil, fearful, hateful, unworthy things have captured your mind and how are they driving you?

Paul knows that in order to rejoice and be free of worry, in order to love, trust, pray and give thanks to God **you must learn to guide the currents of your thought life.** You must get rid of the garbage, the anger, the pornography, the vanity, the self-loathing, the mockery, the self-pity of our thoughts and supplant these - one battle at a time - with "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable..."

That's what building Christians for service is all about. It is a process of personal transformation in the way we think and view others, the world, and ourselves. You do it through prayer, by close study and memorization of Holy Scripture and by growing to trust God more and more.

Let's pray.

Stir up your power, O Lord and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us, through Jesus Christ our Lord." AMEN