

Advent 3

Texts: I Thessalonians 5:16-24

Luke 1:46-55

St. Peter's - Lafayette Hill, PA.

December 14, 2008

Preacher: The Rev. R. Bruce Todd

“Hold Fast to What Is Good!”

This is the time of year parents can use that Special Weapon when their child acts up. You know which one it is. Even if you've never used it, it was most likely used on you as a kid. It's the one where your parent says: “You better be Good - because Santa is watching.” Knowing the power of Santa, kids will adapt their behavior accordingly. This mindset even shows up in letters to Santa. In one collection, there was a letter that read:

Dear Santa: In my house there are three boys. Richard is two. Jeffrey is four. Norman is seven. Richard is good sometimes. Jeffrey is good sometimes. Norman is good all the time. (Signed)
Norman.

Calvin (of Calvin and Hobbes comic strip fame) stands behind a tree, poised to throw a snowball at his "girlfriend." She says, "I see you, Calvin, and you'd better not throw that snowball! I'm mailing a letter to Santa right now." Calvin asks: "Is the envelope sealed?" "Yes," she replies, "but I could write a P.S. on the back." "Do you have a pen?" Calvin asks. "As a matter of fact, I do!" she answers. Calvin drops the snowball and says, "I'll bet she's bluffing, but this is not the time of year to tempt fate."

Yes, the threat of Santa finding out you're not good carries a lot of weight. Then there was one letter that put Santa on notice.

"Dear Santa: Last year you didn't leave me anything good. The year before last year, you didn't leave me anything good. This year is your last chance. Alfred

Kids want Santa to think they are always good because they always like what Santa seems to have in store for them. Throughout my ministry, I have heard people agonize over God's will for their life. Is this God's will for me? Is that God's will for me? Did such-and-such happen because of God's will? Would you like to know what God's will is for you? I can tell you, absolutely, without hesitation, what God's will is for your life. It is right here in Thessalonians. Paul writes: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

There it is from God's word in black and white. God's will is for you **TO BE JOYFUL!** We are to share in Jesus' Joy! - and **IT SHOULD SHOW!!!**

There was a man from Louisville, Kentucky, who had to travel to St. Louis on business. This was years ago when Christian people still kept Sunday as a very special day. For this man,

"keeping the Sabbath" meant not riding the trains on Sunday. So after he finished up his business late Saturday night, he had to stay over in St. Louis until the following Monday morning. On Sunday morning, he left the hotel looking for a place to worship. The streets were quite deserted, but he saw a policeman and asked him for directions to the nearest Protestant church. The stranger thanked the policeman for the information and was about to walk off when he turned and asked the policeman: "Why have you recommended that particular church? There must be several churches nearby that you could have recommended."

The policeman smiled and replied: "I'm not a church man myself, but the people who come out of that church are the happiest looking church-people in St. Louis. I thought that would be the kind of church you would like to attend."

We can relate to that, can't we? Who doesn't want to be around happy people? Would our Policeman who crosses you on Sunday recommend St. Peter's as a place people should come to worship based on your Joyfulness? This is the great secret that many of us have hidden from the world. God's will is for us to be joyful! Don't you think that people would be drawn to this church if we got the reputation as being the happiest looking people in town?

How do we make this happen? Simply by doing what Paul recommends in his letter to the Thessalonians. Do not quench the Spirit. Abstain from every form of evil. Hold fast to what is Good! If we don't let the bad stuff in and we do let the Spirit work within us and hold on to what is Good our Joyfulness will shine through. And it is God's will that we Rejoice Always!

Rejoicing doesn't always show itself in happy smiles or joyful singing. Sometimes our joyfulness is an inward joy that comes from knowing we are doing what God wants us to do, to prepare the way of the Lord, to make thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven; to share the life, love and joy of Jesus Christ with others.

That was the kind of joy felt by Irena Sendler. She recently died at 98-years-old. During WWII, Irena got permission to work in the Warsaw Ghetto, as a Plumbing/Sewer specialist. She had an ulterior motive. Being German, she knew what the Nazi's plans were for the Jews. Irena smuggled infants out in the bottom of her tool box and she also carried in the back of her truck, a Burlap bag for larger kids. She also had a dog in the back that she trained to bark when the Nazi soldiers let her in and out of the ghetto. The soldiers, of course, wanted nothing to do with the dog, and the barking covered the kids & infants' noises. During her time and course of doing this, she managed to smuggle out and save 2500 kids/infants.

Eventually she was caught, and the Nazi's broke both her legs and arms and beat her severely. Irena kept a record of the names of all the kids she smuggled out and kept them in a glass jar, buried under a tree in her back yard. After the war, she tried to locate any parents that may have survived, and reunite the family. Most, had been killed in the gas chambers. Those

kids she helped were placed into foster family homes or adopted. Last year Irena was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. She lost. Al Gore won for doing a slide show on Global Warming. But Irena didn't do this to win a Prize or to be admired by her peers. She did it because she knew her God wanted her to hold fast to what is good.

There is a story about a teenage girl. She was in love, and got pregnant, but it wasn't her finance who got her pregnant. When he found out she was pregnant, he was thinking of canceling the marriage. In her society, unwed mothers could have been stoned. She risked being shunned by her family and friends. Why would she have allowed herself to get into a situation like this? Because Mary knew it was God's Will for her. She knew that giving birth to the Son of God was going to be something good! So she sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant..."

Mary's spirit rejoiced! And it's God's will that we Rejoice! For those of us who are adults, one of the things that make Christmas so joyful is seeing the wide-eyed expressions of wonder on little faces. Children know about joy. Adults can lose their joy so easily. What does it take to rob you of your joy? Which causes more holiday headaches, someone asked: a houseful of relatives - or the words "some assembly required"?

The Exedrin Headache Resource Center - yes, there IS such a thing - took a poll to find out what causes Holiday Headaches. Here is a list of the joy robbers they discovered during the holiday season: -Fighting crowds and traffic -Not getting enough sleep -Not having enough time to get everything done -Spending too much money -Eating or drinking too much -Skipping meals because of busy schedule -Cooking and cleaning -Long plane/ train/ car trips -Being apart from friends and family during the holidays.

The Apostle Paul might tell us that Holiday Headaches come from holding onto Evil and not letting the Spirit in. Hold fast to what is good! That is something to remember - especially this year. The November sales figures are in and merchants say they are not good. Black Friday still has most merchants in the Red. Parents are stressing out because they won't be able to get the things they would like to get for their children. Hold fast to what is good!

Mary & Joseph couldn't find a room in the Inn. There wasn't a comfy crib. They would be in the company of stable animals and scroungy shepherds. But they still fulfilled the will of God - they REJOICED!

That is what we need to remember this season. Do God's Will! Rejoice! Hold fast to what is good! We are told to abstain from every form of Evil. That's not going to be easy to do with all of the doom & gloom reported on the evening News, at the grocery store checkout lines, in those 401K quarterly statements, or while standing in an unemployment line.

Living in this kind of environment, more than ever we need to hold fast to what is Good! Find some way this special season to defeat the blues. Join a group that is singing carols, help out in a soup kitchen, adopt a needy person for Christmas - as many of you have done by taking a tag from our Giving Tree. Our shut-ins who have no one to care about them. Do something positive, something heartwarming, something that will bring someone else joy. For joy has a way of boomeranging and giving the person who gives it more joy than the one who receives it.

Joy is the natural emotion of the Christian. It is God's Will for us. We dare not let it slip away. We can share in Mary's song because it also applies to us. Our soul magnifies the Lord, and our Spirit rejoices in God our Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of us, His Servants.

So during this season - let's do God's Will: "Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Amen!