

Lucia Lloyd's sermon

December 11, 2011

Advent 3, Year B

[Psalm 126](#)

[1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#)

[John 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

What is the will of God? It is one of the big theological questions. If you've ever wondered about what is the will of God, today is your lucky day, because that's exactly what comes up in today's reading from 1 Thessalonians 5:16:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

So there we have it, right from the pages of Holy Writ. The will of God is that you rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. This is pretty good stuff!

The psychology researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky has studied happy people, and discovered 12 things they do differently, which she writes about in her book *The How of Happiness*. Three of the 12 items her research has identified are: Savor life's joys, practice religion and spirituality, express gratitude. Sounds pretty similar to “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.” The other items on her list are also things that you have heard in church and read in the Bible:

Forgive

Avoid social comparisons

Practice acts of kindness to others

Nurture relationships with others

Develop strategies for coping

Commit to your goals

Increase in-the-flow experiences

Take care of your body

Cultivate optimism

All good stuff. But what's striking about this verse from 1 Thessalonians is the holistic sense of it, the completeness of it: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances. We do not have to be victims of our circumstances, we do not have to wait for our circumstances to change: Our rejoicing, our prayer, our giving thanks can happen regardless of circumstances. The Benedictine Monk David Steindl-Rast tells us this: "It is not happiness that makes us grateful; it is gratefulness that makes us happy."

The third Sunday of Advent has a special focus on joy. The third Sunday of Advent is sometimes called "Gaudete Sunday" which comes from the Latin word for "rejoice." Even in the middle of a season whose main color is the purple that symbolizes penitence, on the third Sunday of Advent we can light a rose-colored Advent candle to symbolize rejoicing.

This rejoicing appears in today's psalm, psalm 126. It is the psalm of people who have been worshipping in exile from their beloved sacred space, and then get to return to it. Perhaps you can imagine what it is like to worship in exile from your beloved sacred space, and to hope to return. After all, you have good imaginations. And what would it feel like to have your sacred space restored to you and be able to worship there again?

The psalmist describes it:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, *

then were we like those who dream.

Then was our mouth filled with laughter, *

and our tongue with shouts of joy.

Then they said among the nations, *

"The LORD has done great things for them."

The LORD has done great things for us, *

and we are glad indeed.

Restore our fortunes, O LORD, *

like the watercourses of the Negev.

Those who sowed with tears *

will reap with songs of joy.

Those who go out weeping, carrying the seed, *

will come again with joy, shouldering their sheaves.

It makes us feel more joyful just thinking about it.

Time travel is something we normally think of as existing only in science fiction, but we get our own glimpses of it. A widow walks through a grocery store and sees the pumpernickel bread her husband loved, and before she knows what happened she's right back in the fresh grief again, weeping in the Food Lion aisle. Sometimes all it takes is a whiff of the perfume your former girlfriend wore to take you back. Or the taste of the blueberry crumble takes you to the summers of your childhood. In imagination, we can travel forward in time too. Visualizing yourself achieving your future goals changes you neurologically in the present; so much so that it improves the performance of athletes.

It is a feature of religious ritual in general and Christian ritual in particular, to keep us in touch with this sense of the past, the present, and the future coming together. Our celebration of the Eucharist is a way of going back to the Last Supper of 2000 years ago, and of a way of going forward to the heavenly banquet. And each celebration of the Eucharist is also taking place in this particular moment in the present. We humans think of time as linear, but God doesn't. God can take our timeline and scrunch it up into a ball or squeeze it into a point, or stretch it in every direction and wrap the earth in it.

That's why God can tell us "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" because God knows that who we are does not depend on the circumstances of the present moment, and how we relate to God does not depend on the circumstances of the present moment. In any situation, there is something to give thanks for, something to pray, something to rejoice for, plus we can give thanks for the past and the future too. So God tells us, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

The sense of timelessness of God appears in a lovely piece Barbara Crafton wrote this week:

"If it is so -- as it surely must be -- that God has no past, present or future, but encompasses all of these in an eternal NOW, that the One who "has the whole world in His hands" holds everything material but is neither held nor limited by anything, then it must also be the case that we are also in it. Already. It is not an afterlife, at the end of a linear progression of minutes, years and centuries; it is an also life, existing all around the life we know, and containing it.

It is as if there were two baskets, a large one and a small one. The smaller basket sits in the larger one, which easily holds it. We live in the smaller basket: we and everything we love and hate, we as we are now, and we as we were. We as we shall be. The world as it was before we arrived, and as it will be when we have departed it. The universe from its first inorganic breath to the final sigh of its extinguishing. What was, is now and what shall be -- it is all in the smaller basket, our beautiful home.

We love it here. Almost all of us never want to leave. We count our departure from it as tragedy, the departure of those we hold dear as unbearable loss. Many of us refuse even to discuss that ending: won't make out a will, won't see the life insurance agent, won't choose a healthcare proxy. Won't even say the word "died.". And the ending of the universe that contains us? We find it inconceivable.

It is in the nature of baskets to have holes, is it not -- openings between the strips of wood or straw or grass that have been woven together to form them? If you were in the smaller basket, you might, from time to time, peer out one of the openings to see what's out there. Sometimes you see it in a state you call dreaming. There's something out there, that's for sure, and sometimes you get a glimpse. But the opening through which you peer is small, and you can't really get a good look. And who cares what's out there, anyway? You like it here. Everything you love is here, in the smaller basket.

One day, though, the smaller basket begins to crumble. Soon you stand amid the shards of it. You look around and see that you are in another basket. You see, in fact, that this is the very place you saw, those times when you peered out of the tiny openings in the smaller basket. Oh, you say to yourself, I know this place! I have always been here.

Everything I loved has always been here. Everything is here.

All our times are there. All our loves. All our possibilities, including the ones that never bore fruit here in the smaller basket. Everything has always been there. As you have aged, loss has stabbed you many times, and you have bled freely from the wounds. But take heart. The fragile loves we clutch in a vain attempt to hold them here? They all wait there, just outside the basket's thin walls. The smaller basket is pregnant with us.

Our first birth into this world is frightening, I think -- a perilous journey through an impossibly narrow opening. It must be terrifying for the little traveler -- even a year or

two later, you try to put a turtleneck on a toddler and it evokes an unpleasant memory. But the journey inaugurates the life we love. It's worth it.

We live in fear of our second birth, the one we call death. But it is probably the same: a transition from one state to another, from the rules of one world to a world in which they do not apply.

So be of good cheer. And stay tuned. What we see is not all there is.”

As Barbara Crafton tells us, today on the third Sunday of Advent, we are to be of good cheer. And stay tuned. What we see is not all there is. It's another way of saying what we read in 1 Thessalonians. So whenever we wonder about the will of God, remember: “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”