

## ADVENT 3

15 December 2024

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Philippians 4:4-7

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Today is Gaudete Sunday, that is, the third Sunday in Advent. Traditionally in the church, Advent is kept as a fasting, penitential season like Lent. So just as in Lent, some of us may choose to adopt some special discipline or give up some particular pleasure. That was also, for many in the church, the custom in Advent. And on this third Sunday in Advent, Gaudete Sunday, we have an opportunity to relax our fast. So, if you've been abstaining from chocolate or alcohol since the beginning of Advent, you may have a little day off today to indulge in your chosen vice. And then more days of abstinence until Christmas Day. The day marked as being special, because you see the third candle on our advent wreath is a slightly lighter shade of purple, a shade of pink, to mark it as a particular Sunday.

It's known as Gaudete Sunday because that is the first word of our New Testament reading in Latin. "*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say to you, Rejoice.*" In Latin "rejoice" is Gaudete. The reading invites us to rejoice, and indeed calls us not to be anxious. It says in that famous phrase that is used in the blessing at the end of every service 'the peace of God which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.' What does that mean?

What is 'the peace of God that passes all understanding?' I think when some of us hear that phrase, we perhaps think of a white beach, a blue sea, a shining sun, and balmy days to rest. We think of beautiful flower meadows. We think of calm, of silence, of the absence of disturbance or activity. We think of a warm, fuzzy feeling somewhere within ourselves. A sense of reassurance that everything will be okay. Somehow.

And that may be part of it. But there are a few problems with that interpretation. I think that one is that warm fuzzy feelings don't really 'pass all understanding.' They're just emotions. And everyone has emotions. It's also true that prayer doesn't always produce that warm, fuzzy feeling, which is what the passage seems to imply on that interpretation. It says in 'everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God and the peace of God which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,' which implies that if you pray, you'll have 'the peace that passes all understanding.' But I don't know about you, but I certainly often find myself praying and at the end, I'm not much less anxious than I was before. So what, then, is this 'peace that passes all understanding?'

I think it's something more objective. It's interesting how the word is used in other ancient documents from around the time Paul was writing to the Philippians. The police, in parts of the ancient world from which we have documentary evidence, are called 'guardians of the

peace,' using the same Greek word that Paul uses (εἰρήνη). And what sort of things did the police do in ancient Alexandria where these documents come from? Well, they probably didn't go around pouring citizens cups of cocoa and helping them relax. What they did do, hopefully, is preserve good order, right government, the smooth running of society. There's a fascinating document from the period, which describes the movement of a quantity of corn or grain from one site to another. It describes how some people moved the corn. Some people would sort it, some people would arrange it. There are various, many of them complex, tasks involved in this movement of this shipment of corn. At the end, the document basically says everything was done in peace. Was this operation quiet? I rather think not. Was it undisturbing? Again, I rather think not. The people near this operation, I'm sure, would have been very aware of it. It would have involved a lot of noise and movement. So, what does it mean that it was done in peace? It means everything worked as it should. It was well ordered. It was under the good government of the people in charge.

This is what God's peace is. It's not necessarily a feeling of peace and calm. It's God's sovereign work to order the chaos of this world, so that everything happens according to his will. It's God's power to order everything in this world reliably and well according to his purposes of love.

You and I look at our lives. We look at the news. We look at the world, and it looks exactly as if God is not doing this. And that is why this 'peace passes all understanding.' We cannot understand how this world can have a good, sovereign, powerful God above and behind it. But we trust that it does. And that 'peace passes all understanding.' And it is God's good government of the world which will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, no matter what else may happen, no matter what may be going on that threatens to separate our hearts and minds from Jesus Christ. Even in a difficult, confused and confusing world, God is active beyond our understanding, but active to achieve his good and loving purposes. We trust that because the Bible says so, and that is the peace that passes all understanding.

So, on this Gaudete Sunday, rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say to you, rejoice. Amen.