

**The 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent: Holy Trinity Church: December 12, 2021**

**Philippians 4:4-7**

**Preached**

**By**

**The Rev. John E. Higginbotham+**

**In the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. AMEN.**

**My sisters and brothers in Christ, I don't want to cause you any stress this (Evening) morning, but we are just a couple of weeks away from Christmas.**

**Are you ready? What does "being ready for Christmas" look like for you?**

**Maybe you are the type of person who wants that picture-perfect family**

**Christmas portrait. Maybe you are all about the perfect decorations. Maybe**

**you are all about having that perfect Christmas tree. Quite frankly, it doesn't**

**matter. The only preparation we really need, the only thing that will make**

**Christmas real for us, is to prepare our hearts to receive Jesus.**

**A couple shared a heartwarming story of answered prayer one Christmas a**

**few years ago. The husband participated every year in the toy drive for their**

**local Lions Club. One year, they had collected gifts for forty children. On**

**their way to the Lions Club Christmas party, they learned that there would be**

sixty kids in attendance. They were so sad. They prayed that somehow God would provide for these underprivileged children. There was no time to buy more presents. But they couldn't imagine disappointing some of those kids who were showing up to the Christmas party. As they walked up to the firehouse where the party was held, they met a man on the sidewalk. The man asked the couple, why they looked so sad if they were on their way to a party. He told him of their dilemma, that they would not have enough presents for all the children who would show up that day. Would you believe the man who showed up at the wrong firehouse to vote was Major Tom Quigley of the Marines? And Major Quigley just happened to oversee his unit's Toys for Tots drive that year. A few minutes after the Lions Club party got started, Major Quigley burst through the doors with armloads of gifts—enough for every child.

My sisters and brothers, no matter what your Christmas preparations looks like, I hope you experience the real meaning of Christmas the love, the joy, the hope and the peace of God this Christmas season and all year. We all know in our hearts that there is no gift that can compare to the gift of having knowing God. That's why our passage from Philippians is so relevant. This passage was written by a man who knew what it was like to have every form of success and comfort, and to lose it all. But he found Jesus Christ. And his writings are

full of the love, joy, hope and peace of God that changed his life. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

How did Paul do it? How did Paul live with joy and peace under such stressful circumstances? Verse 7 in our passage is one of the most popular benedictions, or blessings, in the church. “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Then in verse nine, Paul inverts two of the important words in that benediction. Instead of saying “the peace of God”, he says, “And the God of peace will be with you.” I think we found our answer to the question of how Paul lived with joy and peace in the face of suffering and stress. I hope you find that same answer this Christmas season.

There are many folks for whom the glitter of Christmas is a reminder, not of their wealth as children of God, but of their poverty in a materialistic culture.

As someone has wisely noted, if you and I lost the many blessings that we enjoy and then had them restored, we would have a new appreciation for how

**much we really have. Yet deep in our souls many of us are tortured by the demon of discontent.**

**Many of us judge our Christmas by external, materialistic standards: Is our house well-decorated? Did we get just the right gifts? Could your Christmas dinner can be better than TV Chef Terranova, says, “now that’s cooking with class on TV. If all those things fell apart, would your Christmas be “broken”?**

**Some of us don’t struggle with material poverty at Christmas. Instead, we experience a poverty of the spirit. We need something to put our hope in, something that is more meaningful and lasting than decorations and parties and gifts.**

**My sisters and brothers, my prayer for you this weekend, this moment in the 3<sup>rd</sup> week of Advent. The greatest gift in your life is that you will take from God the gift of eternal life by receiving Jesus into our heart and let your Christmas find peace with God. Christmas is a good time to remind ourselves that the “more” we desire has nothing to do with gifts. The “more” we need has nothing to do with money. For most of us, our true poverty has nothing to do with money or things. Our true poverty is a poverty of spirit. What we long for, what we really need, what would really make a difference in our lives this Christmas and every day of the year is to know God more clearly, to know**

**God more nearly, to know God more dearly. And that's the greatest gift of Christmas: The peace of God comes when we know the God of peace.**

**Do you ever think about the first Christmas ever? No one—not Mary and Joseph, not the shepherds, not the wise men, not Elizabeth and Zechariah—no one really understood what God was planning. No one knew what to expect. But they knew the Almighty God had seen them. The Great I AM had chosen them. They knew the God of peace, so even when they didn't understand God's plans, they still experienced God's peace.**

**At the start of World War II, the city of London was preparing for bombing night raids by the Nazi Luftwaffe. The government decided to protect their most vulnerable citizens, their children. Approximately 800,000 children were evacuated to the countryside and placed temporarily with rural foster families for their safety. The government wanted to protect the children from the frightening facts of war, so they did not tell them why they were being sent away or where they were going. As the children were loaded onto the trains, someone asked a young boy, "Where are you going?" The child hesitated a moment, then said, "I don't know, but the king knows." Don't you wish you had the faith of this child? In a troubling and uncertain time, that child found peace in trusting that his king knew where he was going.**

**Advent and Christmas are times when our minds naturally move toward the hope of peace on earth, good will toward all people. That was part of the great messianic hope that Isaiah described hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. He wrote, "The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them." Every year, at this time we rekindle our hope for peace. We look forward to that day when there will be peace in our country and in the world, when innocent children will have no reason for fear. We long for peace, peace within our own hearts, peace within our homes, peace within our world. We long for the peace of God. We long for the God of peace.**

**And the peace of God comes when we trust God with our present circumstances and thank God for our future. That's what the Apostle Paul was teaching us in this passage. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**

**Paul wrote these words when he was on house arrest for preaching about Jesus. He had lost everything from his previous life—his status, his religious community, his home, his safety—when he became a follower of Jesus. But his**

letters reveal a man who was on fire with joy and completely at peace, even when he faced difficult circumstances and an uncertain future. Why? Because he had met Jesus Christ, Immanuel, God with us. And he knew that he could trust every moment of his life, his present circumstances and his future challenges, to the hands of a God who loved him enough to humble Himself and come in the form of a helpless baby, walk in his shoes, and die to give him eternal life. So, Paul could live with peace in the present and gratitude for the future. Can you say that this Christmas season?

Please don't miss the purpose of Christmas. God came to bring us peace. And what does the peace of God do? It transcends, or rises above, all our understanding and it guards our heart and mind. God's peace rises above our circumstances and guards against our fears.

Hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus, God promised that He would send a Messiah to save His people. We are just a few days away from celebrating the greatest moment in the history of creation, the moment when the Almighty God became Immanuel—God *with* us. No matter how out of control our lives may feel, God's purposes for us never change and God's promises to us never change. He came to bring us peace—peace in our lives, peace in our families, peace in our world, and finally, peace with God. And

**that peace is available to you when you receive Jesus as your Messiah and  
Lord. AMEN!**