

Pastor Jon's Sermon from the weekend of December 4/5 2021. 2nd Sunday in Advent.

“How can we be thankful when we experience so much loss?”

Text: Philippians 1:3-11

Have you gotten any good cards or letters lately? Isn't it wonderful to get snail mail? It is getting pricey. Personal letters or cards are the first thing I open when the mail comes. Our 5 year old, Marcella, who is home in the afternoons when the mail comes, also gets excited saying, “Is there anything for me?” As a foster child, whom we are now legal guardians for, she has lots of grandparents and extended family that send her things. Can you see why she gets so excited for mail? She even gets excited when she sees an Amazon truck... she calls them Alexa trucks.

In this second Sunday of Advent, I could talk a lot about John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus to come into the world. John was like the merry maids who clean houses and businesses, calling people into a period of Spiritual House Cleaning. Advent is a penitential season... hence the blue color... A season of repentance and self-examination. Repentance literally means changing one's mind or heart towards something... to make a perspective change or a life change. How many of you need to make a change? Do you have thoughts that are dragging you down?

I think we often get into ruts with our thinking or actions. Like Paul, we do the very things we hate. We become unhealthy in parts of our lives. So repentance is a good thing... daily repentance is even a better thing. Luther was big on this. End each day with the prayer of repentance. How many of you think at the end of each day, I could have done that better. I wish I wouldn't have said that. I often pray, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner.” Repentance allows God to enter in and fill our hearts and minds with good thoughts and hope again.

But what I really want to talk about today is Paul's letter to the Philippians, in particular his thanksgiving section of the letter that we read today... verses 3-11 in chapter 1. In Biblical times, these letters

were to be read in front of everybody like at some baby showers I have been to. Paul is thanking the church people for sharing in his ministry of the good news of Jesus. He has affection for this group of people.

Paul's words here have changed my perspective this week again... and have many times in the past. He is very thankful for the Philippian church that he started as a missionary... even though they are experiencing some conflict between two women leaders in the church. They have prayed for him and have funded his ministry through their offerings. He wants to be with them physically, but is unable to because he is in prison. He is in prison for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, which the Roman Empire and the Jewish leaders didn't like. In fact, he doesn't know if he is going to make it out alive from this last imprisonment. That's right, he is writing, what is known his letter of joy from prison. He says his famous, "to live is Christ to die is gain" in chapter 1:21. The Philippians is one of his favorite churches and he wants to let them know this in a letter.

I also can relate to Paul's thanksgiving because I feel the same way about all of you. I am thankful for all of you in our work of sharing in the Gospel together. I know the timing of the pandemic, turnover, and false starts haven't been easy. We have been through a difficult last few weeks with Vicar Kellie's leaving the congregation. And yet, I am so thankful for all of your work of sharing the gospel not just in church, but in your businesses, in your homes, in your families. You are doing Christ's work in the world, albeit imperfectly, because we are sinners, but you are living out your faith.

Do we have room for improvement? Absolutely. But I want you to know that I love serving here and being your pastor. I want the best of the best for all of you and your children and your children's children. I also feel we need to recommit our time and talents to the church... which is all of us... to our littlest of little and oldest members. And I know, this pandemic has thrown a wrench into all our lives. We have had to put so many things on hold. We have had so many losses. We have fatigue and want be done with it, but omicron and future variants are keeping us in holding pattern.

But let us take a page out of Paul's book. How can we find joy and thankfulness in the midst of our imprisonment, which in a way is this pandemic... or whatever else is binding you. How can we go on living and serving with joy in the gifts God gave us in order to share the gospel in word and deed? How can we change our way of thinking from negativity and despair to positivity and joy again? How can we see all people through the eyes of Jesus again?

Well... in our baptism we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. The spirit gives us fruit that can change our perspective at any time. The fruit of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5 is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. We could all use more of this fruit.

Come Holy Spirit Come. Turn our hearts and minds toward you. Help us to use this season of Advent to make the changes we need to make for ourselves and for the sake of others. In Jesus name, Amen.