

ADVENT III
Lutheran Church of the Master, Troy
December 12, 1976

"WHAT PRICE - PEACE?"

"May you always be joyful in your life in the Lord. I say it again: Rejoice. . . . And God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe, in union with Christ Jesus. Phil. 4:4,7

Paul urges us to "REJOICE." Does everyone here this morning feel like doing that - like rejoicing? I doubt it. Some of us are feeling hassled by Christmas shopping -- some by parties -- some maybe just because they had to get up this morning and come to church. How can we possibly rejoice??

For Paul - there is never a time that a Christian CANNOT rejoice -- because Christians can live without endless anxieties. They take their needs, guilts, burdens to Christ -- asking his help and guidance. And what will that do?? It will give them the peace of God -- that peace which goes far beyond human understanding.

Sounds so simple doesn't it. Sounds so easy in the abstract. But in our day to day lives it sure doesn't seem to add up to such an easy solution. Possibly that means that Paul's theology of joy and peace here is just a lot of PIE IN THE SKY. Maybe it only works for religious fanatics. Maybe it just doesn't have any practical significance man today -- with all his sophisticated systems and matrixes for solving his own problems.

Well - on the one hand, the joy and peace Paul talks about is PIE IN THE SKY. In other words, every faithful Christian knows that he will not experience ultimate joy nor perfect peace (perfect wholeness) until he meets Christ face to face. Call it pie in the sky, call it heaven, call it eternal life, call it the day of judgment -- but that joy and peace is what God promises -- it is our future hope. You either believe that promise or you don't -- to believe is to have faith - to trust God.

So - you see -- the Christian can always rejoice -- for God's peace is always given. God has already paid the price for that peace. It is guaranteed - eternally.

But you and I want more than this ultimate offering. We want a more practical peace -- one that we can have right now -- a more down-to-earth version of that pie-in-the-sky gift.

We want more than the joy of eternal life -- we want to rejoice because of that peace RIGHT NOW. And really - there's nothing improper about such a need or desire -- but that down to earth peace will cost us a little effort, a little energy, maybe a lot of sacrifice.

And it's through the gospel and John the Baptist today that we get the practical guidelines for a down to earth peace. Quite simply - he offers three: SHARE, BE HONEST, and NO VIOLENCE OR LIES.

Look at the gospel. The people ask John - "What are we to do, then?"

John answers. "Whoever has two shirts must give one to the man who has none, and whoever has food must share it." In simple terms, John says down-to-earth-peace happens when we SHARE. And John doesn't say "share only with your own family" - he says share with any man or woman who needs food, shelter or clothing. That's one guideline for down-to-earth peace.

He goes on: now he's talking to the tax collectors. We can compare them to our present day commercial establishment. He says: "Don't collect more than is legal." In short - "Be honest, don't cheat." Surely that's easy enough to understand; again, good practical advice for peace among nations, within government and business, and for church and family.

Finally - John says - "Don't take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely." More simply- NO VIOLENCE OR LIES. Robbery is committed by lying words as well as physical force.

Three practical guidelines for down-to-earth peace -
SHARE, BE HONEST, AND NO VIOLENCE OR LIES.

Three practical guidelines for preparing for the Prince of Peace. Three ways that we become God's instruments of peace on earth and good will to men. Three ways that we can really proclaim the Prince of Peace

as the main attraction of Christmas. SHARE, BE HONEST, AND NO VIOLENCE OR LIES. Three avenues that lead to rejoicing RIGHT NOW - but all three have a large price tag. Because they all require sacrifice on our part. *There is a Price to Peace on Earth - Now!*

For our tendency is toward selfishness rather than sharing -- toward deceiving rather than being honest -- toward violence rather than gentleness. We surely need little proof of all these. News these days is filled with greed, deception, and violence. And what will our response be to all this bad news -- how will we treat these symptoms of a world gone crazy?

We will probably respond with REVENGE -- we will build more and large prisons -- yes, we will treat the symptoms instead of the causes of greed, deception and violence.

But we need not. There is still time this Advent to make God's Word become flesh. There is still time to prepare the way for Christ as John would have us do -- TO SHARE WITH THOSE WHO HAVE NOTHING OR LESS -- TO ASK AND TO TAKE ONLY WHAT WE HAVE COMING -- TO RESPECT THE PERSONAL AND PROPERTY RIGHTS OF ALL PEOPLE -- a far cry from the fragmentation of our present society.

It will cost us a little to prepare in this way -- but it's surely worth the one gift that has been given to us WITHOUT A PRICE TAG - the gift of Jesus Christ.

Yes, God help us to be less conscious of ^{these} price tags, so that we can honestly share his love without violence or lies. For in this way we will do more than treat the symptoms of sin -- we will be instituting a practical plan for peace on earth.

And we will experience EVEN RIGHT NOW the peace of God which goes far beyond human understanding -- that peace which enables us to be joyful - yes to rejoice even now.

AMEN

ADVENT III

Luth Church of the Master, Troy

Dec. 17, 1978

"ALWAYS REJOICING?!?"

"Rejoice always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

I Thes. 5:16

How many times will you and I say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" during this period of Advent and Christmas? What do we mean when we say these things? Are we wishing people a 7-day period of happiness? What if the angel of death should visit our friends of families during this period? Will we still say "Merry Christmas" to those people? Or does death or suffering totally change the reality of Christmas?

If you're anything like me, I think these questions will make you realize that often our wishes for "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" are ~~often~~ very superficial. These wishes are very much tied to the circumstances of the moment; -as long as things are going pretty well, then we can say "Merry Christmas." In other words - we often equate the joy of Christmas with our own circumstances RATHER THAN anything related to God and HIS ACTIVITY at Christmas.

Well, along comes Paul writing to a despondent and persecuted church -- a group of Christians who had really been through the wringer -- the tormented Church of Thessalonica -- and he says to them in the closing words of his first letter: REJOICE ALWAYS!

Here was a group of Christians - who had been tortured, humiliated, and persecuted for believing in Jesus - and Paul not only says "Merry Christmas," he says REJOICE ALWAYS. It's hard enough for us to muster up a little

joy and cheer for a few days at Christmas -- and Paul comes along and tells us to REJOICE ALWAYS.

Could it possibly mean that Paul was taking a sort of "Smile, God loves you" stance with these troubled and persecuted Thessalonians? Was he telling them to smile, hold their chins up, put on happy faces, and grin and bear it? Surely Paul was not advocating that kind of Pollyanna simpletonism!

Many of us know from our own experiences how much it hurts to have people respond to our pain, or sorrow, or bereavement with some kind of self-righteous, pious platitudes - urging us to smile and to keep the chin up. When Paul says "REJOICE ALWAYS" he must surely mean something more than blind, pasted-on smile approach to the dark side of life!

He must be speaking of something far deeper here more complex than the superficial giddiness and masquerading "Merry Christmas" spirit that we pass off as joy during this time of the year. Paul is surely suggesting more than the plastic "holiday cheer" -- the production-line joy that we are given as the sales receipt is put into the shopping bag.

Yes - Paul is expressing the unrestrained joy of the realization that God is at work among us. Paul is reminding that Thessalonians that even though there is suffering, humiliation, and death all around - God is still at work... forgiving those who still live, and receiving those who die unto himself. And for those reasons Paul says: REJOICE ALWAYS!

Among early Christians like Paul - there was always that confidence of knowing that WITH GOD you were in the winning camp. Regardless of the outcome of the battle - Paul

proclaimed the Christian a constant winner! Regardless of the earthly score, Paul announced the victory for the believer!

What has happened to the spirit today? It almost seems our theology today is oriented more toward defeat. Too often we give total emphasis to the cross and overlook the empty tomb! The deep joy of faith has almost become an unknown emotion in today's church. Our Christian worship often strikes the world as gloomy and somber - bereft of joy.

There's a story told of a little four-year old boy who properly took his place beside his mother in the church pew one Sunday morning. He sat through the whole service as quietly as any little four-year-old boy could. As soon as he heard the Benediction - he dashed out the front door and waited in the car. On the way home, he asked his mom, "Mommy, why don't people like God?" She responded: "Why Johnny, how can you say such a thing: People certainly like God." And he quickly followed: "Well then, why don't they ever smile at him?!?"

Out of the mouths of babes comes the truth. Too often both preacher and people focus too much upon our sin and shortcomings - our dark and demonic natures. It is so tempting to wring our hands over the darkness in our world-- we just seem to love to wallow in our despair and the various sad states of the human race.

Why is it that we prefer our own pessimism rather than God's affirmation? Why is it that we are so overly impressed with our limitations and so unimpressed with the gloriousness of God's continuing work in our midst? Why is it that we take our sins so damn seriously - and don't seem to give a damn about God's forgiveness?

It's almost as if we don't want the joy of the kingdom. We many times seem to prefer the

bad news of self-pity and guilt to the good news of God-in-the-flesh. Too often we CAN't and we DON'T rejoice because we forget that God is still patiently working among us.

Well - not so this day! This Advent day is here to remind us of the great joy that we have as believers - regardless of our personal circumstances. It is here to remind us that God does not come into our lives with a gigantic fanfare. There is no blast of trumpets when God enters our earthly inhabitation.

Quite to the contrary - God quietly moves into the dingy, dark corners of our lives. And there he patiently waits for us to call upon him - there he patiently waits to offer us the power of his forgiving love - there he longingly waits for us to trust in his promise of eternal life. There God is -- ever present -- everyready -- to bless and renew. Not just on Christmas day - but everyday! Always patiently waiting for us to call upon him -- everyday the one who is our hope and salvation in all the darkness of life.

And its for that reason that Paul can say with utter confidence; REJOICE ALWAYS - for even now God is moving silently across the canvass of your life and mine to deliver us from the prisons of our guilt and sin. So, again I say: REJOICE ALWAYS!

amen

ADVENT III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 13, 1981

"DOES GOD TAKE SIDES?"

Isaiah writes: The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted, ... to bind up the brokenhearted, ... to proclaim liberty to the captives, ... to comfort all who mourn, ... the Lord will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all nations."

Isaiah 61:1,11

Throughout this past week I have searched for a current and meaningful way to illustrate Isaiah's proclamation of God's liberating spirit -- a power which brings good news to the afflicted, binds up the brokenhearted, offers liberty to those oppressed.

And Lo and Behold -- the Toledo Blade was again the answer to prayer: George Cornell's article was headlined: "RESURGENCE OF CHINA CHURCH LIFE COMES AFTER YEARS OF REPRESSION." The subtitle went on: "More Than 200 Houses of Worship Reported Reopened in China" within the last several months.

To read the article was to be uplifted by the spirit of God publicly and enthusiastically alive. The article points out that since the Communist take-over in 1949 - some 20,000 "house-churches" have been "alive", but underground. Those churches are now operating "above ground," along with more than 200 ~~re-opened~~ public churches. Some 4 million Christians worshipped in China before the take-over; that number has increased significantly in spite of repression -- one congregation reported 1,800 members before the take-over; today the congregation has more than 4,400 members.

What does all this say?? It confirms that the Spirit of the Lord has brought good tidings to

the afflicted ... has bound up the broken-hearted ... has proclaimed liberty to the captives .. has shown that his righteousness and praise does spring forth before all nations, regardless of their political label.

traditionally
 This is why this Sunday was [^] called "Gaudaite" or "Rejoice Sunday" in the past. Because it is the Advent Sunday which foretells that God's spirit brings freedom and good tidings to peoples who are oppressed, repressed, or enslaved by the guilt of the past. This is the Sunday which clearly proclaims that God TAKES SIDES -- he takes sides against repressive and oppressive regimes ... he takes sides with the brokenhearted and those who mourn -- he takes sides with those of lowly degree and those who are hungry ... he takes sides against the ruthless and mighty, and scatters the arrogance of the earthly proud.

This is why our Psalmody today from the Magnificat says "our spirits rejoice in God our Savior ... this is why we magnify the Lord because he has regarded and blessed and liberated even those of lowest degree. He is the Lord and Savior of all nations, not only the rich and powerful. And he has come into this world to make sure that the powerful and the rich do not take advantage of those of lower degree.

Regrettably - God often takes more time to bring these good tidings to the afflicted than we would care to admit. In China, it has taken the spirit of God more than three decades to again show his power ... to again proclaim liberty to the captives of atheistic communism. It is truly regrettable that God often takes that long to assert his spirit. But history truly shows that God is much more patient than we are in establishing his merciful spirit in this world.

From Egypt to Bethlehem, the biblical narrative continues to tell God's story of deliverance. It took Israel 40 years of wandering in the wilderness to find the promised land; but God finally gave liberty to his captive chosen people. It took more than a thousand years of waiting for Israel to see the Messiah; but at last God proclaimed good tidings to the afflicted through Jesus Christ.

God took the side of one of the least of all peoples -- a tiny, insignificant nation, the doormat of the ancient world on which great empires wiped their feet. Israel was the scum of society, but God exalted this people of low degree -- because he is a God who seeks to bind up the broken-hearted ... who seeks to give freedom to those unfairly oppressed ... who brings good tidings to the afflicted.

It is through the liberation of ancient Israel that we see God's intention for us today. God comes into this world to give hope and help to all people experiencing the hopeless and helpless conditions of life. Much as HE Used the strength of Isaiah to do this, he seeks to use the strength of his church today.

Wherever the church sees oppression and systematic affliction -- he calls us to bind up the broken-hearted and seek freedom for the enslaved. That is no easy assignment for the church. It is filled with risks and disappointments; it is steeped with contradictions and controversy; and many times it is even the way of sacrifice and slander. But like China today -- God ultimately *desires* to win the victory -- *to* proclaim liberty to those who have lived under oppression.

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Within the history of Lutheranism alone, we have seen yielded commitment & controversy, success & sacrifice, victory and defeat. With Reformers like Martin Luther, liberty was proclaimed to the captives of ecclesiastical corruption. These reformers paid a great price; yet through their sacrifice, God brought good tidings to the afflicted. Less victorious was the German church some 40 years ago. Her clergy and people were intimidated by the powers of the Third Reich -- they became captives of their own leaders ... and it took God a half-decade to bring good tidings to the afflicted. God is still winding up the broken-hearted today from that delusion of Nazi nationalistic pride.

Much as the faithful people of Israel, Germany, and China have known the hell of oppression -- God has not yet brought good tidings to all the faithful of the world. Many must still patiently wait for God's proclamation of liberty. Christians in Namibia, El Salvador, Argentina, and even many in the USA continue to be held captive today to oppressive powers. In 3rd World countries like Namibia, Christians are caught between the apartheid policies of South Africa and the freedom fighters who are armed and trained by the Soviets.

For whom should our church and its missionaries rally their support? Some, like our government, urge our support for the racist regimes now in control. Other Christians assert that our sympathy should be with the freedom fighters. And still the vast majority of Christians really don't give two hoots; they remain as indifferent to Namibia as they did to Hitler in Germany.

Obviously - God does not give us any instant political solution to this problem. But he does give us his theological position: he urges that we take his side, namely, that we overcome human oppression wherever it rears its ugly head. That we bring good tidings to the afflicted ... wind up the brokenhearted ... and proclaim freedom to

those held captives of oppression. As God's disciples, we are called to uphold his righteous example of mercy and deliverance in this world.

Much as we rejoiced last January with the release of Americans held hostage in Iran, we desire that same rejoicing for all peoples unfairly afflicted in this world. The least we can do relative to our 3rd world brothers and sisters IS TO REMAIN INFORMED AND SHOW OUR CONCERN FOR THE MINISTERS AND MISSIONARIES in those places.

Of course, Our good tidings to the afflicted can be even *more* real here at home. God has offered you and me the opportunity to REJOICE this Advent and Christmas by winding up those brokenhearted by unemployment and economic hard times. Your response this Advent & Christmas to our family assistance fund will insure a Merry Christmas to those held hostage by unemployment.

Next Sunday the bulletin will describe another opportunity called Beach House. This home in Toledo is open 24 hrs/day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks a year TO ANY WOMAN AND HER CHILDREN WHO NEED TEMPORARY SHELTER. It is a home for women who have experienced domestic violence or other domestic problems. It is a place where a dedicated staff and volunteers seek to wind up the brokenhearted. It is a place which needs our support through volunteers, finances, and such things as linens, cleaning supplies, canned goods etc.

And why should we rejoice with opportunities like this?? Because God is giving us an opportunity to do what Christians do best -- to bring good tidings to the afflicted, to wind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to those held hostage -- whether imprisoned by physical or spiritual forces.

Yes - we rejoice with these opportunities not only because they fulfill the meaning and purpose of discipleship -- but we rejoice because God has first shown that he *has taken* our side & he has given us the power to overcome all conditions of oppression -- even the power of death.

For we have all been afflicted -- we have all been brokenhearted -- we have all been held hostage to the power of sin, and fear, and death. But God has not left us helpless and hopeless in any of these conditions. He has bound our wounds when broken ... he has brought us the assurance of love when afflicted ... he has delivered us from the power of yesterday's sin and guilt -- and assured us that we will live eternally with him should death confront us tomorrow.

So today -- ^{we} let us rejoice -- ^{we} let us give thanks for our God who is with us, who has taken our side -- and ^{we} let us exult this same God who came into the world to bring justice and peace and freedom to all.

AMEN

ADVENT III

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

December 12, 1982

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"'TIS THE SEASON TO BE ..."

"The Lord your God is in your midst,...he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love;"

Zephaniah 3:17

"Rejoice, in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand."

Philippians 4:4

The world around us tells us "'Tis the Season to be Jolly," but you and I may feel very distant from that reality. St. Paul says, Rejoice, again I say Rejoice, the Lord is at hand -- and at least for me, last week wasn't a week of rejoicing. There were days that the Lord did not seem to be in my midst -- and yet I knew he'd better be -- at least before Sunday morning at 8:45 and 11:15 a.m.

Maybe you've had a week something like mine. I know that several of my conversations with members this past week surely indicated a week of stress and tension. Fortunately for me -- I was the recipient of a letter from another pastor who shared some of his deep personal binds --- some of which I could identify with -- and possibly some of which you can identify with as well.

I'd like to share a portion of that letter -- which not only shares some of this pastor's burdens -- but also gives the significant clue to the way in which both Paul and Zephaniah understood that WE CAN ALWAYS REJOICE.

"Dear Peter,

Well, last week was like so many. On Monday we had just finished supper and I was heading for another meeting. Ann grabbed me and shouted: 'Do you realize that it's been thirty-two nights since you were home when the children went to bed? Where do we fit into your ministry!?!'

Well, Pete -- you know what I did -- I exploded at Ann and the kids. I told them all I get is pressure from home and criticism from the church. I told them there was only one of me -- there just wasn't enough time for everything!

Ann immediately retorted: "You have 24 hours a day - just like everybody else. It's all a matter of priorities!"

Well, as you know Pete -- she's very right! If I'm not careful, I could spend all my time at the church. I guess I feel more competent as a pastor than I do as a husband or father. But for whatever reason -- it seems that I manage an average of six days and five nights a week at the church. Even that's better than it used to be... and I still don't get the job done.

How do you manage to do it, Pete?? How do you find the time to do it all?? (The obvious answer is that I don't!) [He goes on:] It just seems impossible -- I'm supposed to be the resident theologian, the father of church happenings, the expert in evangelism, stewardship, counseling, worship -- and you know, Pete - the list goes on. Some days I feel as though I'm directing the control tower of O'Hare -- and eleven o'clock comes Sunday morning, ready or not!

You may remember, Pete - this isn't a new problem for me; you remember I went to the doctor in the second year of my ministry. I complained to him that I was always feeling tired; I told him I even woke up feeling tired.

Believe it or not, Pete -- he actually typed out the following prescription for me: "Once a day for the next month - drive out to Greenwood Cemetery. Look around. Take your time. Read several headstones. Then say aloud to yourself: 'Most of these people were convinced that the world just couldn't get along without em.' So, slow up! You don't have to save the entire world -- not all by yourself!"

Well - I still haven't taken his prescription -- seriously! I'm still feeling tired all the time. I guess I've just allowed myself to get all caught up in the society's pace -- I'm always running revved up -- at full speed.

It reminds me of the story I told in one of my sermons in preaching class. It's the one of the old man who was driving along the busy expressway at 40 MPH. Cars were zooming by him -- and each time the drivers were shaking their fists and fingers and yelling: "You're a driving hazard!" Finally, a cop pulls the old man over and asks: "Old man, do you know why I stopped you?" And the old man says: "Sure, Mr Officer, I'm the only one that you could catch!"

Pete -- there have been too many days that I have felt like that old man -- afraid if I slow up, I'll get caught! So I find myself using weekends, and long nights to squeeze in more work. Somebody told me recently I'm suffering from the "BMB syndrome" -- Behold My Busyness!

It's gotten to the point that I almost feel I owe it to God to be tired. Now that's really foolish! It's really foolish to think that God finds JOY in my exhaustion."

It was this final statement that stopped me in my reading tracks: "It's really foolish to think that God finds JOY in my exhaustion!" God doesn't find any JOY in that pastor's exhaustion -- and neither has that pastor found any JOY in his own exhaustion. God doesn't find any JOY when we push ourselves beyond our own limits -- when we try to be everything to everyone (which we and God knows is impossible).

Every person in this room has probably had one experience where he/she has gone beyond his limits to help someone else-- only to have the whole thing backfire in his face for some silly reason. As pastors -- we often give hours upon hours of our time in counseling others. And too often one word or one suggestion from that counseling will be taken out of context AND THE WHOLE THING BECOMES A MESS! The same can be true of a marital relationship -- one negative word or action can too often spoil years of devoted love.

The same can too often be true for the Christmas season. Too often we're singing "'Tis the season to be BUSY and OVERBURDENED" rather than "'Tis the season to be joyful and at peace." We often wonder why we don't feel JOYFUL and AT PEACE. The answer is too simple: "We haven't allowed any time for peace and joy." Equally for our relationships -- we wonder why they become a MESS. Again, we don't allow time for forgiveness, for peace, for joy -- we too often are too busy finding fault or finding other activities to fill our daily calendars.

And so it is that we wonder why we don't feel that God is in our midst?!? How can God be in our midst when we don't give him a chance??? How can we experience God's power of peace and joy when we have jammed our schedules full of frantic sometimes judgmental activity!?!?

Ann (the pastor's wife in the letter earlier read) hit the issue square on the nose when she said to her pastor-husband: "It's all a matter of priorities!" Or said differently - we experience that reality to which we give our great time and attention.

St. Paul could say with absolute honesty and enthusiasm: "Rejoice, again, I say rejoice Let all men know of your forbearance -- your patience. The Lord is at hand." Paul didn't say this because life for him was always jolly. But even in his worst times, God's peace and love and forgiveness were always near to Paul -- because Paul always took the time to keep God very near! Paul kept Jesus Christ at the center of things! The Word of God, the mission of the Church, the forgiveness of others, the giving of God's mercy to others -- these were not just some kind of religious potluck activities for Paul to be worked in with all the other activities of life. These powers from God were the very reason for living!

For Zephaniah, for Paul, for John the Baptist -- the merciful love of God was not just another activity -- another club to belong to in society -- another option for the Christmas season. The merciful love of God was the very purpose for all of our human relationships!

When Paul says "Rejoice, the Lord is at hand" -- he meant that you and I are always just one brief moment away from the reconciling power of God. We are always just one second away from forgiveness or condemnation. We are just one second away from peace or hatred.

But as Christians - we REJOICE -- WE REJOICE ALWAYS, because we know the choice that we will make given those circumstances: WE WILL CHOOSE LOVING RECONCILIATION -- WE WILL CHOOSE FORGIVING REUNION.

Because as Christians -- our highest priority is TO TAKE THE TIME TO MAKE GOD NEAR -- our highest priority is to forgive and to give -- our highest priority is to make God's love and mercy a reality in our midst!

And unlike the pastor earlier read about -- we do not make God's love our highest priority TO EAR SPECIAL FAVOR FROM HIM -- or so that we can earn a special bonus from God's people. God has already given us our greatest bonus--

his son, Jesus Christ. We make God's love our highest priority out of gratitude for God's loving closeness in Jesus Christ!

So -- 'Tis the Season to be near Jesus Christ -- that means, 'tis the season to rebuild relationships which have been fractured by distance, by abuse, by absence, by busyness. 'Tis the time to take time to acknowledge that God is in our midst -- that we are but one moment away from sharing the fulness of his peace and joy and love. 'Tis the time...tis the season to make God's power the highest priority in all our relationships -- because then we can truly REJOICE, not only in this season, not only when times are good -- BUT WE CAN REJOICE ALWAYS!

AMEN

ADVENT III

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 11, 1989 (Christmas Reception Day)
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"HAVE NO ANXIETY!?"

"The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." Philipians 4:5-7

On this 11th day of December, 1988 -- exactly two weeks before Christmas Day ... with just 13 shopping days left -- St. Paul admonishes us: "Have no anxiety about anything!"

It's pretty obvious, isn't it, that St. Paul was not living in the 20th century. And from my perspective, it is even more obvious he wasn't suffering with heart disease ... or that he certainly didn't have teenagers ... and even more certain that he didn't have little ones bugging him every day saying, "Daddy, how many more days until Christmas??"

How can St. Paul make such an unrealistic claim for Christianity: "Have no anxiety about anything! Can you imagine Paul saying this to the families of the thousands of Armenians killed in this week's earth quake: "Have no anxiety about anything!" How would Paul's words feel to third-world victims of starvation & poverty while they watch North Americans spend billions and billions for a better Christmas.

Of course, we need not look across the Atlantic to see tragedy and tribulation. There are thousands of poor and homeless wandering our own streets this Advent. "Have no anxiety about anything." What about the children suffering despair or even death due to holiday highway drunkenness, house fires or partying parents: "Have no anxiety about anything?" What about the innocent victims of environmental or industrial contamination? How about many in our own city who daily experience racial or religious persecution? Or what about those down the block ... or maybe even sitting right here ... carrying the burdens of cancer, the anger of divorce, the frustrations of family disruption, the fear of physical or emotional abuse, the phobia of financial debt, or the fracture of fixed incomes? How about others suffering from unreasonable demands at work, from unwanted pregnancies, from forced retirement, from physical disability, or from the dope dealers and criminals carousing our schools and neighborhoods? And Paul says: "Have no anxiety about anything!?"

Just listening to many of you here at Hope since my part-time return to work - esp. during these frantic holidays -- the list of disappointments, demands, duties, difficulties, devastations, YES - ANXIETIES -- IS STAGGERING! And St. Paul has the audacity to say: "Have no anxiety about anything, but with prayer and supplication of thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

What kind of pie-in-the-sky platitudes is Paul feeding us? Don't his words sound like radical, right-wing, religious rhetoric which simplistically says: "Have no anxiety -- don't worry ... be happy ... you have nothing to fear, for God is near. Just hang in there, because faithful people never have troubles or worries -- everything always comes out rosy!"

Well, be assured, St. Paul was not trying to sound like some kind of wishful religious thinker. First, we must clearly understand that Paul's perspective for these thoughts was totally different from our own. When Paul says in this letter, "The Lord is at hand," he means it very literally. Paul expected at any moment that Jesus Christ would re-appear on earth -- Christ would at any moment make his cosmic re-entry into creation. That being the case, Paul says: "Have no anxiety about little things of insignificance ..." at any moment Jesus will put all anxieties to rest. So just be prepared to offer "in thanksgiving" everything up to God ... because that's the reality of things about to happen very soon!

Well, it didn't happen as Paul expected, did it!? Jesus did not come riding out of the sky on the proverbial white horse. He did not, and has not yet re-entered the world in his resurrected flesh. But we all know -- believing in Jesus Christ has never meant requiring his physical return at any precise moment. THE LORD IS STILL VERY MUCH AT HAND! Not in the flesh and blood of a single person, but in the flesh and blood of his living body, the church. He is very much present RIGHT HERE through his Word and his Sacraments. (When the water of baptism was just poured over Christopher's head - Jesus Christ was very much present.) The words of Paul are not some outdated theological testimony -- the presence and power of Jesus Christ's body still makes those words very real and very applicable to our everyday lives.

Obviously, when Paul says "Have no anxiety about anything" we all know that such words alone are never a full cure to future "anxiety attacks." There will always be anxiety for the human race -- that's the reality of being human and sinful. As long as we are breathing, we will suffer from some anxiety - some worry, some fear, some fretting, and some frustration. But especially in this hectic holiday season, there is great power from Christ in Paul's words: "Have no anxiety about anything, but by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." There are three practical principles behind Paul's admonition that are not only eternally true, but esp. helpful in reducing our daily anxieties. I have summarized these three principles in six words: 1) TURN OVER! 2) TAKE HOLD! 3) FOCUS UPON!

The first principle for "having no anxiety" is to TURN OVER ... "turn over to God those things for which you have no control in the first place." Allow me to illustrate with my own disease. On my mother's side, my family history is fraught with heart disease: grandparents, uncles, aunts, and mother ... all who died from heart disease. But what can I do about this family history?? Not anything ... except to be aware of it!!

So, should I worry about this family history of heart disease? Absolutely not! Because there's little I can do to change my family history! So in prayer and supplication even with thanksgiving -- I turn my family history over to God! I let him worry about it, rather than me ... because I'm a lot healthier and happier that way. As the great AA prayer says, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change ..."
TURN OVER THE THINGS YOU CANNOT CHANGE TO GOD!

I am certain after this week's earthquake, there are many people "deeply anxious" about earthquakes. Paul says, "Have no anxiety about earthquakes," because worrying and fretting won't change the earthquake reality one bit! **TURN OVER THOSE THINGS FOR WHICH YOU HAVE NO CONTROL.** Let go and let God take control of the uncontrollable realities that so often cause us sleepless nights and anxious days.

So take an inventory of your anxiety. What uncontrollable realities are you worrying about? What things that you cannot change are you fretting about changing? Well, turn them over to God ... in prayer and supplication, be thankful that you can unload those "uncontrollables" onto him!!

But the second principle is quite the opposite: **"TAKE HOLD ... be responsible for the things that you can change."** Or as the AA prayer says, "grant me the courage to change the things I can." Prayer and supplication is not only "letting go," it is also "taking hold" -- "taking responsibility for change." Again, I'll use my recent illness as an example. As I have already said, to reduce my anxiety I must "turn over" or let go of my family history ... that's something I can't change. But I can be very responsible for some changes in lifestyle that will not only reduce my "illness anxiety," but may even help my family's history!

As you might guess, I have drastically changed my diet relative to saturated fats and cholesterol. That's change that I can "take hold of." Likewise, ever since I began walking after surgery -- I have not missed a day of physical exercise. Before surgery, even though I played tennis and golf, I really never "took hold" of a daily exercise regimen. Obviously, now it's a matter of life or death for me. Isn't it sad that we sometimes have to be threatened with "death" before we "take hold of those things that give life."

Again using the earlier example, we have little or no control over earthquakes, but we can "take hold of where we build our homes and locate our cities." Obviously, we can reduce our anxiety by avoiding "faults" and other shaky ground.

So, take an inventory of your fears and your worries. How can you "take hold to change" that anxiety? Possibly some of you are hanging onto grief or grudges. How much of that grief can you "turn over" to God?? How can you "take hold" to transform that grudge?? Have you talked to somebody about it? Have you sought professional support? Do you really want to be less anxious? Then DO as I'm presently doing with the Rehab nurses at Toledo Hospital - start taking charge of your life by praying and supplicating -- which means "talking over your problems" with those who can really help you.

Yes, life can be much less anxious if we "turn over" those things that we cannot control and "take hold" of those things which we can change. But the third principle is probably the most important for the holiday season: "FOCUS UPON" -- namely, "focus upon a power beyond yourself rather than all the principalities, powers & things around you." We say that we long for peace at Christmas ... and then what do we do: we bake, we shop, we party, we spend, we wrap, we schedule, we scurry, we decorate, we exchange, we bake some more, we party some more, we spend some more ... and this cycle goes on from four to six weeks. And then we wonder why there's all pain and no peace at Christmas?!? We wonder why these days are so filled with stress and anxiety and worry!

When Paul says, "Have no anxiety about anything, but take your requests to God ..." I think he had a very special meaning for this season: FOCUS UPON THE PERSON OF CHRISTMAS NOT ONLY THE THINGS OF CHRISTMAS!

It's like the story of the poor little old lady who was shopping near the wealthy man. She was overheard saying: "Oh, if only I had fifty dollars, I could be so content this Christmas." The wealthy man thought for a few moments, and then said, "Fifty dollars won't hurt me at all." So he walked to her and gave her a fifty dollar bill with "best wishes" for Christmas. With great gestures, she showed him much gratitude. But then as she was walking away, he overheard her mumbling under her breath: "Why on earth didn't I say a hundred dollars?"

God help us that we not lose the FOCUS UPON THE PERSON OF CHRISTMAS as we greedily go after all the things of Christmas. We so desperately need A PERSONAL FOCUS in this season. We need to pray and supplicate with thanksgiving for the Christ, not only for all the things under the tree. BECAUSE AS WE FOCUS UPON THE CHRIST, the pain and paranoia of this season soon quickly become the peace and goodwill of God.

It's like the famous Blondin, who walked the tight rope over Niagara Falls. He never faltered or failed once. His secret was simple: he kept his eyes fixed on a large silver star that he had erected at the far end of his walk. The star was the center of his attention and guided him safely through the anxiety and fear of his walk.

Likewise for us: we also have a star guiding us through this season and our whole lifetime - it is the star of Bethlehem. As we fix our eyes upon it, our attention is always directed to him who came to free us from ALL bondage and ALL anxiety that we experience in life. LET US TAKE TIME RIGHT NOW TO PRAY ... AND TO SUPPLICATE WITH THANKSGIVING FOR THE CHRIST OF CHRISTMAS /.../LET US TURN OVER WHAT WE CAN'T CHANGE TO THE CONTROL OF GOD /.../ LET US TAKE HOLD OF WHAT WE CAN CHANGE AND DO IT NOW ... and then we will have less anxiety, because the peace of God, which passes all human understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. AMEN.

ADVENT III

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

December 16, 1990

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THIS IS YOUR LIFE"

John came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. ... And he said, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one whom you do not know ... " John 1:7-8, 26

For those of us who were alive in the late 50's and early 60's - there was a weekly television show that we rarely missed: THIS IS YOUR LIFE. The show always began with some unsuspecting personality -- usually a figure from the sports or entertainment world - receiving an unannounced visit from Ralph Edwards, the show's host. After a few moments of uneasy chatter, Edward's would announce: MICHAEL JORDON - THIS IS YOUR LIFE ... and the personality would be whisked away to the television studio where the real program took place.

Surprise would follow surprise. Achievements were described, past glories were relived, often difficult early years were revealed, mystery guests were introduced who had not seen the star for years ... it was a show filled with many intimate and touching moments.

By the end of 30 minutes - most of us watching the show were gushing in tears as the concluding scene revealed an orgy of hugging and kissing. It was a story out of fairyland or the magic kingdom -- always a virtuous catalog of good deeds, always a happily-ever-after ending, and always the further glorification of this star's life (which in most cases was already pretty well glorified). Just think of all the nostalgia you younger members have missed.

But the facts are - WE LOVE shows like THIS IS YOUR LIFE. Most of us have a real fascination with entertainment and sports figures -- we love to learn the secrets of their past lives. Unfortunately, "This Is Your Life" never told the whole truth ... we never heard all the less scrupulous details. But we also love these kinds of shows because they make a big production out of peoples' lives - esp. people who are rich and famous. And there's nothing quite as impressive as being able to say -- "Oh, I knew that person when he lived on my street as a kid." We love to be able to say that "I shook that president's hand, or "I ate dinner next to that person at Tony Packo's." To this very day, I still keep this picture in my office taken with the former bishop of the LCA. That was a big day ... I was rubbing shoulders with the king of kings of the LCA. We are all great name droppers -- telling one another "I know that person ... or she's one of my good friends." We love to impress others with the glory of being in the limelight. If we can just convince everyone we know that person ... then it's not only her life, but it's my life too.

All in all - I guess this isn't real harmful for any of us. We all need to feel that we matter in this world -- that our presence here counts for something. But television shows like THIS IS YOUR LIFE also reinforce one of our worst human temptations: TO ALWAYS SEEK THE GLORY FOR OURSELVES - TO MAKE THE AIM AND PURPOSE OF LIVING AN EVERLASTING ATTEMPT TO BE #1 IN THE LIMELIGHT ... TO MAKE THE QUEST OF LIFE A QUEST FOR PERSONAL GLORY AND STATUS.

Is it any wonder that so much of Christmas ends up being a celebration of self-glorification. Instead of our children just being thankful for home, for family, for love and for a few gifts -- they end up telling their friends that they had a better Christmas "because I got more than you did." All the glory of Christmas becomes too easily equated with how much I got ... with a glorification of ourselves.

John the Baptist enters every Advent to make certain that we keep not only Christmas ... but our whole lives in balance. Just as he entered last Sunday ... and just as Pastor Silleck emphasized that last week's theme was a reminder to "Be Alert to minimizing our expectations IN BEING HOLY PEOPLE OF GOD" - John enters again today to say: BE ALERT to another version of THIS IS YOUR LIFE. There will certainly be times that we will want to glorify and uplift one another's lives. In fact, it is imperative as human beings that we do this now and then. But the basic vision - the basic mission and purpose of YOUR LIFE AND MINE as Christians "is to point to the one who is greater than ourselves." Such is John's version of THIS IS YOUR LIFE. And there is no greater life to be lived ... there is no greater life to be celebrated ... there is no greater life to be featured than a LIFE which uplifts the greatness of God ... which points to the true light ... which celebrates the greatest life of grace ever given.

Dear friends in Christ at Hope Lutheran -- THIS IS YOUR LIFE. Your host today is not Ralph Edwards or Peter Martyn. Your host today is John the Baptist ... and he is announcing to you and to me THAT GOD HAS GIVEN A VERY SPECIAL FEATURE TO YOUR LIFE & MINE ... we have the highest privilege of all: we are to show others the greatest life that ever lived. John said it this way: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

How easily John could have misrepresented THAT GREATER LIFE. For centuries, the people had not heard the voice of a true prophet. Finally John came on the scene ... and even though he was very crude, people recognized in him the voice of true prophecy. They flocked to the wilderness to hear this new prophet. As we see from today's text -- even the priests, Levites, and Pharisees were concerned about his identity. In fact, they were asking him, "Are you truly the Messiah, are you Elijah returned ... are you the one we have been expecting??"

How tempting it could have been for John to say -- "Hey, this isn't half bad ... I've got all these people flocking out here to be with me ... I could really make a mint out of this deal. Let's see now, a small fee for everyone who repents ... and I could get rid of these rags and never eat honey or locusts again. I could be living with the rich and famous. Enough of this preparing the way for that other guy -- it's time to make a killing for myself." We have all seen certain evangelists and other religious types/traditions succumb to this temptation - their mission has not been one of prophecy but profiteering.

But John came to show what balance means in the Christian life. He said "no" to his own power and prestige -- he said "no" to his own coventousness and greed -- he said "no" to his own temptation to make himself the object of God's glory. His LIFE, your LIFE and my LIFE story are just the same - we are messengers called to bear witness - sent by God to show the world that there is one greater who is yet to come. In fact, that one has already come - as John says, he stands among us and yet many times we don't even know him.

Yes, THIS IS YOUR LIFE ... and this is mine: first, to announce to the world that there is one who is greater than all of us. There is not greater privilege or responsibility than being a messenger of this true light. But as John says, the hard part is showing that this greater one stands among us ... and yet we often don't see him. Because Jesus Christ today is not known by what he looks like (certainly he doesn't look like a babe in a manger), rather he is known by what he does. And what does he do?? "He brings good tidings to the afflicted, he binds up the brokenhearted, he proclaims liberty to the captives, he opens doors for those imprisoned by guilt, fear, and injustice ... he gives a garland instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

This is the baptismal garment that is put upon us when we were baptized (like Erica today). In Holy Baptism, God adorns us with his power and attributes. He says to each of us: Now ... THIS IS YOUR LIFE ... your life is to point to the one who is greater ... but in gratitude for his grace, your life is also to be a reflection of his gracious goodness.

Is it any wonder that Christ is among us, and yet he's often difficult to see. He's hard to see because instead of people pointing to him ... instead of people glorifying his greatness - SO MANY ARE POINTING TO THEMSELVES. This whole world is on a global ego trip -- glorifying itself for all of its own greatness, as if it never had a creator and has no need for a redeemer. That's why Christian nurture is such an important follow-up to baptism -- so every child grows up to bear witness like John the Baptist ... pointing to the true light and seeking to reflect the glory of his works.

Is it any wonder that Hope Lutheran has designated its Christmas offering to the Battered Women's Shelter of the YWCA ... and to Lutheran World Relief's World Hunger ... and to the new Lutheran Campus Ministry at U.T. THIS IS YOUR LIFE ... AND THIS IS MY LIFE - to point out the one who is greater than us and to show the world how we glorify his name by "bringing good tidings to the afflicted, by binding up the brokenhearted, by proclaiming liberty to those held captive by guilt or greed, by giving garlands instead ashes.

How much I wish you had all become acquainted with Alice Arnold, Phyllis Ness' mother whom I buried yesterday. She personified the balanced Christian life to which John is pointing us today. For more than 50 years - she lived that life through 1st Presbyterian Church in Toledo. But last August, while continuing to suffer with cancer but still going to 1st Pres. every Sunday - she had to leave 1st Pres. - because it was in a black neighborhood, and nobody was coming to church there anymore. So messengers like Alice Arnold were permanently locked out of their own church. Nobody wanted to hear the Good News any longer in a black neighborhood. Some day we will learn that white and black messengers are called to glorify God together - because God is greater than white or black.

Yes - THIS IS YOUR LIFE ... to prepare the way for the one who is greater than all of us by doing those works which glorify his name. Such was the life of Ward and Elma Geib -- and for those who have been at Hope long enough ... Ward and Elma's name could be changed to Gus and Elsie. When Ward was a young man, he felt the call to ordained ministry. But many men of the early 1900's, his education was interrupted by WWI, then marriage, and then a family. He never finished the training needed for ordination. Instead he spent his working years as a custodian of a large, downtown urban church. Between the two of them, they spent several decades facilitating the ministry of that great congregation.

Elma cooked and served meals to the church groups and the homeless. With amazing grace, she organized, prepared and served hundreds of wedding receptions. Brides and their mothers didn't have to worry when Elma was in charge. And Ward was there every day at the crack of dawn - shoveling walks, building fires in the furnaces, keeping every room spotless, and greeting members on Sunday with the charm of the best of pastors. Never once did a member not receive a word of encouragement or good humor from Ward.

Ward and Elma Geib were not THE LIGHT. They would have never been featured on THIS IS YOUR LIFE. But their lives were a constant witness to the LIGHT ... AND THEIR WORKS GLORIFIED NOT THEMSELVES, BUT THE NAME OF HIM WHO WAS GREATER THAN THEY. This is not only the life of Ward and Elma Geib -- THIS IS YOUR LIFE, AND THIS IS MY LIFE.

And this is why we bring ourselves and our children to be baptized, nurtured, and RE-confirmed every Sunday in this place. Because this is the only place in the world where we get our lives back in balance - where we finally give the true glory to the one who is and always will be greater than all of us put together. And this is the only place where this SAME ONE blesses and glorifies us with his gifts, his vision, and his purpose for our lives - to bring good tidings to all who are afflicted. Yes, with a little less fanfare than Ralph Edwards, he says to each of us: THIS IS YOUR LIFE. AMEN.

ADVENT III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 15, 1991
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"FINDING THAT P E R F E C T G I F T"

"The Lord your God is in your midst ... he will rejoice over you with gladness, he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing as on a day of festival."

(Zephaniah 3:17-18a)

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I say, Rejoice."

(Philippians 4:4)

Well, only nine shopping days left 'til Christmas. Just nine days left for me to FIND THAT PERFECT GIFT ... and I begin my shopping tomorrow. This prelude time to Christmas -- whether we call it Advent or whatever -- is certainly filled with the expectations of perfection, isn't it?!? We're all MAKING THAT LIST AND CHECKING IT TWICE ... and we're trying to be fully certain that we will make it another PERFECT Xmas. There's a real obsession with PERFECTION at Xmas, isn't there?

Last Sunday, the church staff spent many hours & over \$500 (STAFF money) to again offer THE PERFECT STAFF RECEPTION. For weeks now and through this coming week, many of you have been or will be preparing for PERFECT Xmas parties. And as I already said - if you're like me, you haven't had time to check your list twice ... cause you're still just making the first one for your spouse or children. And then there was my annual effort (and maybe yours) to make this year's decorations more perfect than last year's. And the choirs at Hope, along with a multitude of other choral groups, have been diligently preparing for perfect renditions of the "Messiah" and other holiday favorites. And if you're a preacher - then you are faced with the annual expectation of preaching the most moving Advent or Christmas sermon for all those people who come only once a year to church. And finally, there's the annual parade of parents and grandparents to Larson Hall to see their little ones in "the best Xmas pageant ever!"

Well, in the past two weeks, you have certainly heard two Advent sermons that were "nigh perfect." Pastor Michaels on Advent I graphically reflected that "the signs of our times" are rampant with self-indulgence, violence, and the sickness of sin - resulting in senseless murders and sexual perversity of all kinds. Larry proclaimed that in Advent, God offers a sign that breaks through this darkness and gives a lasting ray of hope and peace to our times. Last Sunday, Pastor Silleck reinforced John the Baptist's basic focus upon repentance--eg. making straight the mountains of emotional pain and bulldozing the piles of ambition that lead to the materialism of this season. In short, Jeff spearheaded the Baptist's emphasis: that John pointed beyond himself to a far more perfect reality for this world than he or anyone else could create.

I certainly have no need today to improve upon the perfection that you have already heard from these pulpit

masters. In fact, quite to the contrary on this Advent III, I want to say and do just the opposite of what seems to be so prevalent during our pre-Christmas days! Namely, if you've come to seek from me the perfect Christmas message - you'll go home disappointed today: BECAUSE I AM NOT THE CREATOR OF SUCH A PERFECT GIFT. Likewise, if anyone in my family expects me TO FIND THE PERFECT CHRISTMAS GIFTS FOR THEM -- then they will be very unhappy this Christmas: BECAUSE NO MATTER HOW MANY THINGS I SEEK OR BUY ... NONE OF THEM WILL BE THE PERFECT GIFT FOR CHRISTMAS. Finally, if you are looking to me ... or even to each other TO BE THE INCARNATION OF THAT PERFECT CHRISTMAS SPIRIT for these days ... you will be discouraged: BECAUSE THE PERFECT SPIRIT FOR CHRISTMAS IS A GIFT THAT MUST BE RECEIVED BEFORE IT CAN BE GIVEN.

But before I get to sound like just another Advent voice crying in the wilderness - let me share with you a story from a Pastor Lindvall which I believe graphically captures the PERFECT GIFT THAT WE ARE ALL LOOKING FOR. Lindvall tells of a church which had held a Christmas pagaent for 47 years with the same pagaent director. (Let's see - Debbie came here at 37 five years ago; that would make her 84 when she finishes.) Well there was only ONE goal for this director's pagaents - PERFECTION, AND NOTHING LESS. For 47 years, she had run the perfect Xmas pagaent like clockwork: perfect recitations, perfect pacing, perfect soloists, perfect costuming, perfect everything! Then one year, something much better happened!

For you see - this director's commitment to PERFECTION was greater than her LOVE FOR GOD/CHILDREN.(REPEAT) Her reasoning went like this: "When there are too many children, there's no control." So this year, the Education Committee (which incl. three mothers of last year's rejected Marys, Josephs, Wise Men and shepherds) passed the following resolution: "All children who wish to be in the Xmas pagaent may do so. Parts will be found for everyone." This was more than the long-time director could take: she resigned in anger & disgust!

Well, this year's pagaent didn't fall flat, but it was different. There were more than a dozen shepherds, at least 20 angels (a real heavenly host), more than a couple dozen sheep, and many other animals. And since many of the boys and girls came from farms and knew that sheep wandered -- they did just that ... they wandered all over the sanctuary.

But the real climax of the play came when Joseph entered with Mary clutching a Cabbage-Patch doll in a blue blanket. In previous years, the narrator had always read from the King James version that "Mary, his espoused wife, was great with child." This year, it was the Good News version, which read: "And Joseph went to register Mary, who was promised to him in marriage, for she was pregnant." At the word "pregnant" Joseph froze in his tracks ... looked at Mary incredulously ... and blurted out: "Is it really true -- you were pregnant?"

Whether it was the timing or the innocence of the remark, it brought the house down. People were laughing so hard that tears were rolling down their faces. And the former director sat there with a smug look of "I-told-you-so." But then Silent Night began to be sung. And the sheep bleated their way down the side aisle tripping over one another in the dark and finally finding empty pew space all around the former director. At the same time, snow began falling and the church fell deafly quiet. And then, Minnie McDonnell, who was hard of hearing and always spoke too loudly, broke the spell as she whispered loud enough for everyone to hear: "Now that was PERFECT, I MEAN JUST PERFECT!" (DRAMATIC PAUSE!)

FINDING THE PERFECT GIFT for Christmas has nothing to do with my buying or your giving. The perfection is not ours to buy! FINDING THE PERFECT GIFT has nothing to do with my readiness ... or with how much you think you're feeling the Christmas spirit. The perfection is not dependent upon my readiness or your feelings about Christmas. How arrogant of John the Baptist and each of us who think that WE CAN PREPARE THE WAY FOR THE PERFECT GIFT, THE PERFECT MUSIC, THE PERFECT DECORATIONS, THE PERFECT PARTY, OR THE PERFECT SPIRIT OF CHRISTMAS. As St. Paul beckons today - the "reason for our rejoicing in the Lord" is that GOD HAS ALREADY FOUND THE PERFECT GIFT FOR EACH OF US FOR CHRISTMAS! And it is the only gift that is given regardless of whether we have been naughty or nice! And unlike so many directors and pastors and CEO's and other controlling people in this world - this SAME God wants everyone to have a part in HIS powerful pagaentry of LOVE AT CHRISTMAS. Regardless of how poorly we sing or recite or just stand there gawking at the manger -- he wants us to be TOUCHED BY THE PERFECTION OF HIS LOVE. In fact, he has so dramatically touched each of us in the flesh ... that like Minnie McDonnell, we can see sheep wandering and sheperds hardly knowing which way to go ... but we still praise God by saying: "Now that is perfect ... I mean just perfect!"

I ask you on this day of Hope's Xmas pagaent -- why do we all love to see our kids in this pagaent year after year after year?? Because unlike any sermon - the Xmas pagaent reminds us WHO WE ARE - AND WHOSE WE ARE! We are fumbling, freckled, foisty, free-spirited children at heart -- we often sing off key, we miss our cues and even mess up our lines, we don't say it as loudly as we're supposed to, we often look like sheep wandering without a shepherd -- BUT GOD STILL COMES TO US AND LOVES US JUST THE WAY WE ARE -- IMPERFECT, SINFUL, AND FOREVER NEEDING FORGIVENESS!(John 3) So what's this week's word for getting a grip on Christmas: "Let God be the PERFECT giver ... LET GOD BE THE GIVER OF PERFECTION THIS XMAS FOR YOU!

There's not one of us WHO CAN FIND THE PERFECT GIFT for Xmas. God has already FOUND IT FOR US. We can only receive his perfect gift with praise and thanksgiving. And then we can rejoice! AND HOW DO WE REJOICE?? "He who has two coats will share with him who has none; and she who has food will do likewise. And there will be no signs of theft or violence or false accusations - for the one who is mightier than all of us HAS AGAIN COME INTO OUR MIDST; AND HE HAS BROUGHT PEACE AND GOODWILL ON EARTH FOR ALL PEOPLE. AMEN.

Advent III
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
December 11, 1994
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"POINTING TO A MORE POWERFUL ONE"

John the Baptist said, "Bear fruits worthy of repentance. "Do not say we have Abraham as our ancestor. ... I baptize with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. Luke 3:16

One of the basic principles of science is known as the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics. Technically, that law says that entropy of an isolated system always increases (Bernie?). I'm told these complicated-sounding words are really describing a very basic idea: namely, that left to themselves, things fall apart. The natural tendency of things is to become more disorganized and chaotic. How true for many of us during these hectic days before Christmas!!

But think of other things: A leaf falls to the ground and in time decomposes into the soil. **It goes from organized to disorganized.** Children build a snowman; in time, the snowman turns into a formless blob of ice. **It goes from orderly to chaotic.** Or think of your house ... or in my case, the kitchen. If you're like me, you clean the kitchen with great diligence ... only to find an hour later it has been trashed again by dirty dishes and other clutter. As my family well knows - I can't get away from chaos in my job, so I often use the kitchen as my realm of order & control in this world. But it never works; it always becomes just another realm of chaos.

John the Baptist saw a world very much like my kitchen ... very much fallen apart; a world disintegrating because of chaos and destruction, rebellion and separation from God. It was a lot worse than mere dirty dishes. John's view was that this world drastically needed to turn repent - to turn back to a power of renewal, reconstruction, and reconciliation. For John that power was not himself; that power that would re-organize and re-stabilize the world was non other than Jesus Christ!!

But for John, that power was not merely some Christmas warm fuzzy of a Jesus in a manger. If that power was truly God, then that power was also an expression of wrath. **Because of the chaotic and rebellious nature of people during his time, John could only envision God as an angry God.** A God who hated the indifference & destructiveness that He saw among so many of his so-called pious followers. They all claimed to "know Abraham," but they were filled with greed & immorality. They did not show the fruits of God's spirit. And so God was angry with them. Most of us do not like this vision of God's power; nor do we like the prophets who remind us that God gets angry. But why wouldn't God hate evil? What kind of a God would we believe in if He had no capacity for indignation with

pain and chaos? Would any of us ever choose a God who was too lazy or too weak or too spineless to deal with the evil that destroys our children? **Would we possibly want a God who is a sleepily-dullard, who chuckles when Cain kills Abel?**

John envisions a God who gets angry precisely because LOVING YOUR CHILDREN means getting angry with them when they are disobedient or disrespectful. **What kind of mother smiles** when her child sneaks a gun into school? **What kind of surgeon** would have no wrath against cancer or heart disease; no hatred for heroin or smoking; no anger at the maiming & slaughtering of young boys & girls in war or on our highways? As pastor Gordon Lund says, "the capacity for grace always requires the capacity for wrath." Or said more simply, God or anyone else who really loves **gets angry when their love goes unappreciated!**

This past week I was at a Xmas party where Sue and I shared a glass of wine afterward with another couple. These two parents were proudly telling us that their college-age sons felt organized religion was ridiculous. Obviously, many times organized religion is hypocritical. In fact, that's exactly what John the Baptist was critiquing: calling true followers to repent, to turn back to the real power of Christ. But the thing that was most irritating for me was that these parents, evidently unknowingly, were approving of their son's rebellion & disrespect for God. It's one thing to realize that our children will rebel; it's quite another to merely condone it. **God knows we will rebel, but he doesn't condone it - he gets mad about it.** These sons were putting themselves on a pedestal of self-righteousness; like the Pharisees, they were claiming that they know **the life of the spirit** better than all those dummies who are part of organized religion.

That's the spirit of rebellion & chaos which John is attacking - and for which he says God is very angry. God is very mad about parents who do not "stand firm for the fiath" with their rebellious children. Every time he sees a parent allow a child to "go his/her own way," God gets angry because, just like the 2nd Law of Thermo, **a child left to himself soon falls apart.** When parents let their children choose to go whichever way the wind blows, those same parents have violated one of the greatest promises they ever made: **THE PROMISE IN BAPTISM TO ALWAYS POINT TO THE MORE POWERFUL ONE - JESUS CHRIST!**

So it is that we need John the Baptist in Advent! He wakes us up to God's anger: to the truth that God will be filled with wrath when we let our faithfulness to Him fall apart. Like any good father (mother), God will not leave us to ourselves -- because that always leads his children to falling apart. He comes to us as The One Who Was ... Who Is ... and Who Is To Come: he comes as a Light to lead us out of the darkness of our own stupidity, to show us His Way: the Way which shares a coat for the one in need, which always gives to others with honor and trust, and which never abuses anyone **because his Way always points to the greatest power and authority of love & mercy ever known to humankind: Jesus Christ!** AMEN.

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“WHAT DO WE EXPECT?”

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?’ Jesus answered, ‘Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. Matt. 11:2-5

Ask any normal child at this time of the year what he/she expects for Christmas, and be prepared for a long list of expectations. Whether we like it or not, that’s the aura that surrounds the third Sunday of Advent – it is a time of great expectation, of great anticipation and waiting ... it is a time when children are hoping & wondering & desiring. In one sense, it is a time when the secular and the sacred are uplifting similar themes of expectation.

It reminds me of the comic strip, *FOR BETTER OR WORSE*, where young Michael is looking under the tree at the multitude of presents, and he says, “I wonder what I’m gonna get? I asked for several CD’s, a laser game, some action packs, a camera outfit, a computer upgrade, a boom box, & a 10-speed.”

As Michael is talking out loud, his Grampa enters the room listening with a smile. As the two of them stand together in front of the tree, Grampa says” “You know, Mike – we’ve got it all! We’ve got our health, our home, a warm fire, good food, loving family, wonderful country, and a solid faith. Only a fool could ask for anything more!!”

Well – how many of us would agree with Grampa?? Most of us in this room could say the same thing that Grampa said, right? But deep down in our heart and soul – many of us are still not satisfied. Somehow or other, many of us expect much more! We expect this Christmas to be more dramatic than those in the past. Some of us expect bigger and better toys. Some of us expect that this Christmas will resolve problems of the past. Others may expect that the gayety and giving will take away the pain and emptiness of Sept. 11th and other losses. I don’t have any definitive answers for any of these expectations – but I do know that this is a major theme of this third Sunday of Advent: **WHAT DO WE EXPECT BECAUSE OF THE COMING OF CHRIST?**

That was a question that had confronted John the Baptist from the time that he had encountered Jesus at his baptism. John knew that he was to serve as a prophet and forerunner of Jesus. His mission was to prepare the way for the one who was greater than anyone else. In a real sense, we could say that John the Baptist was awestruck with his mission to prepare the way – he took this

task and mission with utmost seriousness. But the question remains: Did John truly understand the true nature of Jesus' messianic role in the world?? Was John really on the same page with Jesus? As a wilderness man, John seemed to impose his own expectations – his own sternness upon Jesus. John said that Christ would come into the world WITH RETRIBUTION ... with the AXE of judgment; according to John, Jesus' whole mission was to cut down every tree that did not bear good fruit. For John, baptism was a fire of damnation not the water of regeneration ... not the promise of restoration, repentance and renewal. John's marketing mentality was a message of gloom and doom for an unrepentant world. Out of fear and trepidation of this cosmic Christ – John predicted that the world better be instantly transformed.

Well, we all know the facts, don't we? It didn't happen that way with Jesus. Our Lord did not bring the world stuttering and stammering to its knees. Jesus was too much the incarnation of a gracious God; he was too much the advocate of a loving Father; he was too much the forgiving guardian of lost children who needed warm embracing and firm redirection. Is it any wonder that John would ask from his prison cell: "Are you the one, or should we be looking for someone else??" The corrupt and immoral world had not been transformed fast enough for John; Jesus had not fulfilled John's expectations of the true Messiah! Jesus had been too gracious, too healing, too forgiving, too compassionate, too patient, too kind, too loving, too understanding, too willing to sit with the publicans and sinners!!

So Jesus tells John's disciples to go back and tell him the facts: "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk; lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised and the poor finally have received some good news."

In essence Jesus was saying, "Mine is not a mission of condemnation and judgment – mine is my Father's mission of restoration and rescue." Mine is not a mission of desecrating & denouncing disciples – mine is a mission of making them healing instruments of my peace on earth. The signs of God's transformation were happening. But Jesus did not come into the world TO DO IT ALL FOR US. Rather he came to show us the way, the truth and the life of Messianic living. Jesus, Emmanuel, God with Us – came to dwell in our hearts and minds so that our vision of Christmas would be more than "what we got under the tree." He came to give us a new treasure for our hearts and a new vision for our eyes – NAMELY, to live by the mercy & compassion of our God.

Jesus came to give us what we need most in this world -- healing and wholeness. And that doesn't mean only physical or medical healing; it means healing and wholeness in our relationships. Because the facts are – we are all suffering from pain, paranoia, distress & disease ... whether we know it or not. There is not one single person among us who can say that something is not amiss – every one of us has something out of kilter. And Jesus' whole mission is to help us find renewal and restoration from all of life's unfairness and disappointments and handicaps and misunderstandings.

Christmas celebrates that God came into this world to touch his people with mercy rather than judgment ... with compassion rather than condemnation. Jesus came not to give us things, but to give us a reason to go on living – namely, to share his mercy and compassion with everyone. As Martin Marty says, “At Christmas we are expecting to have our mean selves killed & reborn, our mean lives redirected, our mean sights lifted, and our mean manner changed.” Now – that’s what we expect from Christ’s coming – being changed from MEAN to MERCIFUL, from HATEFUL to LOVING, from SELFISH to SACRIFICIAL. That reality is beautifully uplifted in Leslie Weatherhead’s story of the “Nixie Clerk” – the postal clerk who handles all the mail that can’t be delivered due to an insufficient addresses (like Santa /the North pole). Here’s the Nixie’s story:

“The letters piled in as usual addressed to Santa. I get hundreds of these every year. Christmas week I was working late. There was still a mad rush at the windows and outer office. Crowds continued to rush through the corridors. But a great shadow of sorrow rested over me and my burning eyes. Finally, the messenger brought me the last “Nixies.” I took up the first one which had an attached note from Postman 34; it read: “This letter given to me by a little girl at 302 Walnut Street.” I shuttered, for that was my own home address. The envelope was small, addressed to ‘Santa Claus, North Pole.’ I recognized my own little girl’s cramped writing; her letter went as follows:

Dear Santa Claus:

We are very sad at home this year, and I don’t want you to bring me anything. Little Charlie, my youngest brother, went up to heaven last week, and all I want you to do when you come to my house is to take his toys to him. I will leave them in the corner by the chimney, esp. his hobbyhorse and train. He loved riding that horse and playing with that train. So you just take them to him and don’t bring me anything.

If you could give Daddy something that would make him stop crying all the time – that would be the best thing you could do for me. I heard him telling mommy that only ETERNITY could cure him. Could you bring him a little of that – just a little ETERNITY. Thanks, and be sure to take the horse to Charlie. Love, Marion.

Is it any wonder that God came into this world as a child? Children so often possess the power of transformation – they know what to say to give us reason to go on. All Marion asked for was a little ETERNITY for her daddy – just a small measure of God’s mercy, love & compassion for her daddy.

What do we EXPECT from the coming of Christ into this world? Hopefully, not instant transformation! And hopefully not condemnation or judgment for the problems that we have caused. But like little Marion – I hope we are expecting just a little ETERNITY ... a treasure of mercy & compassion for our hearts ... a gift of love & forgiveness for those we have hurt. With just a little ETERNITY – we can be assured of the best Christmas EVER.

Amen.