

The Third Sunday of Advent – December 11, 2011 (Rich Simpson)  
Thessalonians 5:16-24

*The Church existed before the New Testament.* This means, among other things, that Jesus didn't carry around a King James Version of the Bible with all of his lines in red! It also means that when Jesus or Paul or Mary Magdalene referred to the Holy Scriptures, they meant the Old Testament.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, the disciples gathered in Jerusalem and then on the fiftieth day—Pentecost—the Holy Spirit came to empower the Church for mission. (At least that is the way that Luke tells the story.) The community of people who were followers of “The Way” of Jesus began to spread around the Mediterranean Sea, taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. They weren't reading about Jesus in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John. They were remembering the man they knew and re-telling his stories to others—stories about lost sons and mustard seeds and about how when you were with Jesus there always seemed to be more than enough bread, with plenty of leftovers.

As this movement spread, there were some key moments along the way: perhaps none bigger than when Saul, a persecutor of this community, was blinded on the road to Damascus. By God's amazing grace, Saul finally saw the truth and became a new man on a new mission, this time “a mission from God.” With a new name to go along with his new mission, Paul begins to spread the good news to the Gentiles. One of his first stops was Thessalonica, where he founded a church, as he also would in Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus and elsewhere. And then he wrote them letters. His letters weren't yet the Bible; they were...letters! Decades later, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John would finally write their gospels. And only later would all of these documents become part of the Bible. So that is what I mean when I say the Church exists before the New Testament: under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the early Church *creates* the New Testament.

All of this little introduction to the New Testament is a bonus, and simply by way of saying this without anyone scratching their head: *First Thessalonians is the oldest document in the New Testament.* It is the earliest of Paul's Letters, written around the middle of the first century—less than two decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus—and almost two decades *before* Mark's Gospel was written. These words give us a glimpse into the earliest years of what life was like in those Christian house-churches of Thessalonica. In the opening words of this short epistle, Paul writes:

“We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before God your work of *faith* and labor of *love* and steadfastness of *hope*...” (I Thessalonians 1:2-3)

*Faith, hope, and love*—did you hear that?—the very same words that Paul will famously unpack in a later letter to a conflicted congregation in Corinth. Paul and the believers in Thessalonica thought that the end of the world was coming soon (and very soon)—that Christ's return as king of kings and lord of lords was imminent. So this short letter is dealing with questions about how the community can “keep alert” and stay ready for that day. (That is why it makes such good Advent reading.) How to do that? *By waking up to a life of faith, hope, and love.*

Those early Christians were a people of expectation who were waiting for Christ to return and to establish the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven. They were waiting for God's peaceable

The Third Sunday of Advent – December 11, 2011 (Rich Simpson)  
Thessalonians 5:16-24

kingdom—that day when lion and lamb would play together and you no longer had to worry about your child being bitten by a poisonous asp. A day when they would no longer hurt or destroy on all of God’s holy mountain; a day when swords would be beaten into plowshares—which is just a poetic way of talking about a lasting peace dividend—a vision of the day when there is plenty of money to feed the hungry and the Pentagon is having bake sales!

So this was the primary theological question those early Christians wrestled with: *how to live as a people who were prepared, a people of expectation*. The answer to that question suggested by St. Paul was to live with faith, hope, and love “in the meantime.”

Last week Jill spoke about distinguishing Advent from Lent. For me this is a very important distinction to make. Both are seasons of preparation. But preparing for a birth is very different from preparing for a death. I love it that we have midnight blue vestments here, given in memory of Rudy Zlody, who died in Advent. Purple in Advent confuses matters and allows Advent to get absorbed into becoming a “little Lent.” Our midnight blue vestments invite us to celebrate Advent differently.

It’s true, as Jill said last weekend, that there is a somber part of Advent and some overlap. This is our second week in a row with John the Baptist, who is all about repentance—which is definitely a key theme in Lent as well. But as we light those candles on that wreath, one at a time, we remember that they are associated with words like hope and peace and joy and love. If we make Advent too much like Lent we will miss the boat. Advent is about anticipation. It’s like people who are expecting a child have to get the nursery ready and go to birthing classes. Unlike Lent, we sing our alleluias all the way through Advent. Like John the Baptist we are called to help prepare the way and make the paths straight. Next weekend we will join Mary in saying “yes, Lord, let it be with me according to your word, as we prepare a place within ourselves for the Christ-child to be born. At the beginning of chapter five of First Thessalonians, Paul writes:

“Now concerning the times and the seasons, you do not need to have anything written to you...for you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.” (I Thessalonians 5:1-2)

Paul being Paul, of course, he does have a bit more to say. But this is important: it’s not to put the fear of God into them. That is sometimes how we hear the preachers on television and in some other places talking about the end of human history: as fire and brimstone, *as threat*. You better repent or you will be left behind! You better accept Jesus or you’ll end up on the naughty list and not the nice one! But that is not where Paul goes with this. Instead, he offers a word of encouragement. Because you are children of the day, be sure to act like it! Since you are children of light, make sure you walk the walk! And then these words:

- respect one another
- esteem one another
- be at peace with one another
- admonish the idlers
- encourage the fainthearted and help the weak
- be patient with everyone

The Third Sunday of Advent – December 11, 2011 (Rich Simpson)  
Thessalonians 5:16-24

- don't repay evil with evil; instead, respond to evil by doing good!

Those words are in turn followed by the verses we heard today, verses 16-24 of the fifth chapter of First Thessalonians:

- *rejoice* always
- *pray* without ceasing
- *give thanks* in all circumstances
- do not quench the Spirit
- do not despise the words of prophets
- test everything
- hold fast to what is good

These words are like a mission statement for a parish that is not only in the midst of Advent, but that is trying to be faithful to Christ 52 weeks a year, with God's help. It's how we are called to live "in the meantime." As we pray for this parish family, I feel as your pastor a lot like I imagine St. Paul felt about the first-century Christians in Thessalonica: so grateful for the ways that we are already doing these things and wanting just to say: keep it up! Keep respecting one another and esteeming one another and be at peace as we continue to rejoice always and pray without ceasing and give thanks in all circumstances. *Do not quench the Spirit! Hold fast to what is good!* And as we practice these things here at St. Francis, let them spread from this building into our homes and streets and community...

On this day we light the third candle in our wreaths: the rose candle. This third Sunday of Advent is called *Gaudete* Sunday – from the Latin word that means "rejoice." Don't you love being an Episcopalian, so you don't have to rely on the creativity of your priest to come up with some new theme every week? This reading from the earliest decades of the Church's life goes with the theme of this day as we light this rose candle of joy. *This season is about joy*—it's not something we have to wait until Christmas to talk about, or to experience. If we try to do Advent without joy we miss the point. *Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*

But if Advent is not Lent, we do well to remember that it's not Christmas either. There is good reason for us to be waiting expectantly with the guy clothed in the garments of a prophet and with Mary whose belly is getting bigger and bigger. We need to resist letting the dominant culture set the agenda. I think that is the big counter-cultural message of this season is for us to stay focused on what really matters. True joy takes us way deeper than instant gratification. The reason for this season is about way more than whether the clerk in the mall says "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays."

Advent gives us a chance in the midst of a crazy month to reflect on what it means to be the Church and why it matters not only for our sake, but for the sake of this broken world. It gives us an opportunity to ask: how can we be a more joyful, prayerful, Eucharistic, spirit-filled, prophetic, tested community in the midst of so much fluff. How can we keep growing into the full stature of Christ? If we keep doing these things—rejoicing, praying, giving thanks—these things we are already doing—then we will be ready enough to receive the gift that is Christmas.