



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church
www.mzluth.org

December 14, 2008

Advent 3

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Malachi 4:1-6

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 71

Second Lesson: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Gospel: John 1:6-8, 19-28

The True Holiday Spirit

Comes from the Spirit's fire

Shows itself in action and attitude

We talk a lot about the holiday spirit at this time of the year, don't we? You'll see all kinds of different phrases for celebrating the holiday spirit; which makes you wonder exactly what it is they are encouraging us to celebrate. If you read any of the statistics this time of the year, it seems that depression goes up. A survey I recently read said that two-thirds of people say that at some time or another in their life they've expressed seasonal depression at this time of the year. The suicide rates go up. All kinds of problems like that go up, so when I see some of those signs at times in department stores, I wonder exactly what spirit they're talking about that they want me to catch.

So as we gather together today and we hear the encouragement not to put out the Spirit's fire, we get to focus on a completely different spirit, don't we? One who lives in us; one who gives us the answer to focus upon when we do face seasonal blues. I think that is a very real thing, because at this time of the year sometimes we put on ourselves a pressure to have everything perfect, everything go just so, find the perfect gift, have the perfect decorations, have the perfect cookies and if anything happens to any one of those things, sometimes we can get down. Then on top of it all, as you get older, you look back when you were a child and everything always seemed to be perfect as a kid. Because all you remember is ripping apart gifts and opening them up. You don't even remember that they broke two days later. You just remember the joy of opening them up.

But when we are older, we look back on other things and we look around and maybe sometimes some of the holiday traditions we really enjoyed were ones that we shared with a loved one that is now gone. And we find that that holiday spirit can lead to some of these feelings of being down or being in the dumps.

That's why it's so very important for us today to do exactly what God talks to us about—to live in the Spirit, the holiday Spirit, the Spirit's fire. The true holiday Spirit comes from the Spirit of God who lives within us, who burns within us and whom God tells us, "Don't put it out" because that's the answer to the things that trouble us. The Spirit leads us to focus on God's love for us in Christ, which is a certainty and a perfect thing. No matter how often our perfect plans flop, God's plans for us in Christ always remain perfect.

Then we see that this true holiday Spirit doesn't show up in tinsel and in decorations and in perfectly melted chocolate kisses on top of a cookie. The true holiday Spirit shows itself in our actions and in our attitudes. Our actions we can control. And our attitudes God can build up in us as we do the things he tells us to do.

It's kind of interesting when he says to us, "Don't put out the Spirit's fire." He immediately tells us what would put out the Spirit's fire, doesn't he? He says, "Don't treat prophecies with contempt." How do you treat prophecies with contempt? Look with disdain at your Bible? No. Don't look at your Bible would be one way to treat your prophecies with contempt, right? The Spirit's fire is born in us through water and the Word or through the Word that's proclaimed to us. The Spirit's fire is fueled in us through the Gospel message that God loves us and has taken away every last one of our sins through the life and death of Christ. That comes to us through these prophecies, through the Words of Scripture, through the Word that's connected with the Sacraments. It's just God shoveling coal on the fire of the Spirit in our hearts.

So if we look at Scripture and we get bored with it, or we think we have more important things to do or better things to do at this time of the year than to make time for God's Word, than to treasure and revel and let the forgiveness of the Sacraments wash over us, then we are treating prophecies with contempt. And when that happens, and Satan is going to be using this time of the year to get us to treat prophecies with contempt to think that we don't have time for it, to think that we don't have time to just sit back and think about God becoming flesh, to sit back and think about God coming again in all his glory this next time, not as a babe in a manger but in glory with all his angels, to not sit back and take time to think about how he comes to us through Word and Sacrament and how he desperately longs to come to us in those ways, to marvel at the intense love our God has for us.

And then to remember what it tells us, "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it." He will keep us blameless. He will keep us in the faith until the end. Nothing can separate us from the love of God that's in Christ Jesus. Not even the holiday blues can remove God's love for us in Christ.

Now at times, being alone feels that way. At times, not having everything we want feels as though we're alone. But your God loved you so much that he became human. He lived and died in your place. Then he tells you, those who die in the Lord are with the Lord. And he promises you, the one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. He will keep your whole spirit, soul and body blameless when Christ comes again. That's his promise to you. That's his certainty. That's not a Madison Avenue ad. That's not something to induce you to get into Target and buy the perfect gift for that person. That is a certainty that is the bedrock of your life. So build on it and live in it.

And as you live in it, God tells us it will show itself. It will show itself in ways that are amazing. "Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances." Of those three, which is the easiest?

Pray continually, right? Being joyful isn't always easy. Giving thanks in all circumstances isn't easy. But if we pray, connecting prayer with Bible study so that God talks to us, and we talk to him in prayer about what we read about as we treat prophecies with respect and stoke the Spirit's fire in us, that will help us then to be joyful and to give thanks in all circumstances.

Giving thanks in all circumstances is a tough thing. It requires that we take our eyes off of what we see, the things that might lead us to feel blue. It requires that we take our eyes off of those things and focus on the reasons we have to be thankful.

There are a lot of little things we can be thankful for. Someone made coffee this morning. I can smell it when I walk into my office. It smells great. That's something to be thankful for, but it's not huge, right? There are other things you can be thankful for that are a little better. Look around at the people around you. You've got fellow believers that love the Lord just like you do. You've got fellow believers that God has put in your life so that you can help and encourage one another.

In reading about holiday depression, it said one of the things that often cause it is loneliness or when there's loss in families. This guy wrote and he said, "I firmly believe that one of the things our God does for us is he puts us in church families because they can become the closest thing to our blood family that we have. When we lose our blood family, we still have our brothers and sisters in Christ." I believe that with all my heart.

We might not always be perfect, obviously, and we might not always live our faith the best way that we can, but God puts us together so that frail, weak jars of clay that we are, we can encourage and comfort one another. So as you look around, give thanks for the people around you. Give thanks for that little kid that runs into your legs today when you are standing downstairs drinking coffee and maybe you spill it on yourself. Give thanks for him. It's a wonderful blessing because that little child is growing up in Christ and as they see you smile at them and say, "That's okay. Don't worry about it. I forgive you." They'll learn to see what a Christian looks like and how a Christian acts, and they'll see God's love in Christ in your actions.

Give thanks for those people that take the time to serve you. Give thanks to those people that do stop and say, "Is there anything you want to talk about?" even if you don't want to talk about anything. Be thankful that God has put them there for you. And then use them when you need to. But be thankful in all circumstances, not just when you get the gift you want. But just like your mom told you, "When Grandma gives you a sweater, still say 'thank you.'" That's what we as Christians need to learn to do. When things don't go well, look around and see the other blessings God has put around you, and always focus on that greatest blessing—the forgiveness he has given you in Christ and the love he gives you in his Sacraments.

Be joyful always. That's hard for us I think because I think we equate joy with being giddy or always putting a smile on our face. God here isn't telling us to act like we act sometimes when we go to a Christmas party and it's your spouse's work party. You go

there and you don't know those people all that well and you smile and put that fake smile on your face and talk to people as though you really care or they really care about you. You're just making conversation and by the end of the night, your face kind of hurts because you aren't smiling genuinely. You're just kind of putting on a false front as you talk with people. That's not what God's talking about.

As a Christian, we can have a joy that's there even as the tears flow. We can have a joy that's there even when we are sad. Our joy is in knowing that our God loves us and that nothing can separate us from his love. Our joy is in knowing that those loved ones that we have lost, those that have died in the Lord, are with their Lord. We can't see the glory they endure now, but by God's grace, we believe it to be true. And we find joy in it even as we feel sadness. Be joyful, not be fake; be joyful in God's love for you in Christ.

It's an other-worldly joy. That's why I think it's so hard for us to put it into words or to even explain or to understand always. It's a joy that comes from knowing our God loves us no matter what. It's a joy that comes from knowing he is with us even as we face things that tear us apart. It comes from the fact that "he who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all," he'll be with us through all things. I might not like it. I might not want to go through it. But I'll never go through it alone, because I have a God who is with me. His Spirit lives in me. And he strengthens me.

I think that's some of what God is encouraging us to focus upon as we go through the holiday season and maybe we feel some of these blues. Focus on the true holiday Spirit. It doesn't come just from a song. It comes from a Son, God's Son, who loved you enough to die for you; and his Spirit who loves you enough to work in you through Word and Sacrament.