

December 12, 2021

Philippians 4:4-7

PREPARING FOR CHRISTMAS IS ...

“To Rejoice”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The Atheist Bus Campaign was an advertising campaign in 2008 and 2009 that aimed to place what they called “peaceful and upbeat” messages about atheism on transport media in Britain, in response to evangelical Christian advertising. The campaign’s original goal was to raise £5,500 to run 30 buses across London for four weeks early in 2009 with the slogan: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Influenced by the Atheist Bus Campaign, the American Humanist Association launched a bus campaign in Washington, D.C., in November 2008 with the slogan: “Why believe in a God? Just be good for goodness’ sake.”

Sometimes in life people say things that they think are really smooth and make a point when in fact they betray the true problem within their hearts. That is the case with the two slogans I just read to you. Take those two slogans - “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life” and “Why believe in a God? Just be good for goodness’ sake” - and consider them in light of this statement from Jesus recorded for us in John 3:19-21,

And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.”

From the atheist’s point of view, the notion of God (light) makes you worry and prevents you from enjoying your life. So they want you to know that there is probably no God. Therefore be happy. Don’t worry about facing God and doing what God desires. Rather, (hate the light) enjoy your life instead of denying yourself the things that you really want - the things that Jesus keeps you from enjoying. And why believe in a God who makes demands that take you away from your self love and personal satisfaction? Create for yourself your own style of goodness not for God’s sake but for your own sake. Do works that foster self love to reach personal satisfaction rather than works carried out in love toward God and for others where you are living outside yourself.

A Lutheran Pastor once wrote in a sermon: “A self-proclaimed atheist once told me, ‘I don’t need religion to be happy.’ Which I thought was a strange thing to say, because I’m not a Christian in order to be happy and there are many unhappy Christians. And an unbeliever can be happy, I suppose. Well, it depends on how you define happiness.” Indeed! If happiness is defined as enjoying good food, spending time with your family and friends, being healthy, wealthy, and safe, then I suppose that one might conclude that you don’t need religion. But here’s the rub according to the apostle John in his first epistle (2:15-17): “... all that is in the world - the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life ... is passing away ... but whoever does the will of God abides forever.”

All of *It* - and *It* is never perfect and fully satisfying - all of *It* is passing away. With these words, the atheistic slogans and smooth talk falls flat. The real issue of happiness revolves around something

greater than stuff. It is something that abides forever. These sobering words of Jesus in the gospel of John (3:36) hit hard: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” Every intrusion to our so-called happiness is a disturbing manifestation of the truth that things with us and things down here are not right and the way they are supposed to be. And when we realize that the final word on everything that we think makes us happy down here is the word “death,” what will be after that?

So, where is happiness and joy to be found? Where do we find meaning? That is what most people seem to want. It looms so large in the minds of our culture that the constitution of our country guarantees the right to every individual to pursue happiness. But just because you pursue it does not mean that you’re going to get it. This is especially if you look for it in all the wrong places. So, where do you find happiness and joy? Don’t forget the slogan of the atheist: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Really?!

The apostle Paul writes in our epistle lesson for this morning: “Rejoice *in the Lord* always; again I will say, rejoice.” Please keep in mind that when Paul writes this he is in prison. He is not writing as one who has the whole world by the tail - he is not in charge of his own life with every treasure before him. Quite the opposite! What then is the secret of this rejoicing? What is it that causes him to be happy when it seems that he has nothing to be happy about? It all centers in those three words: “... in the Lord.” Those three words are pointing to the fountain of true and forever rejoicing in every circumstance. They say to us that the source of true happiness is first found in a relationship with the Lord. It’s not found in a good education, lots of money, position, a life of leisure, friends and family, good health, having every desire satisfied, or whatever else you can name of the creation.

Paul's rejoicing “in the Lord” was founded upon the cross where his Lord Jesus Christ came to deal with every intrusion to genuine happiness and all that has caused this world to be passing away. Jesus came to deal with death so that this final word may no longer be the final word. Jesus came to die our death to restore life. He came to restore our destination to be with him in everlasting happiness and joy. Jesus has given us a new final word on the matter. Whoever knows and believes in him abides forever, and for this we cannot help but to be happy and rejoice always. Thus, a pink candle appears in the midst of the purple candles of Advent. There is joy in the midst of all sorrow. It is a happiness and joy that survives in a messed up world with a people who are still struggling with being messed up.

Preparing for Christmas is ... **To Rejoice**. And we have every reason to do just that! Rejoice that you are loved and forgiven for all your sins and saved from their consequences. Rejoice that you have a Savior who is eternal and gives you everything without end. The Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah (Jeremiah 9:23-24): “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.” Indeed! Your happiness is to be found in Jesus who is the eternal one who has earned for you eternal joy even as you wait and suffer in this life until the moment when you reach the fulfillment of all he has promised. Paul writes: “If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the

things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory (Col. 3:1-4).”

What a happy end awaits us! And we are happy now for all that has been given! Can you lose everything and still rejoice? Only if your rejoicing is in him who is good and promises every good thing. Does this mean that you will never feel the pressure of sadness? Of course not. What Paul is saying is that in the deliverance of Jesus there is joy in sadness. Therefore, “let your reasonableness be known to everyone.” In other words, do not be anxious or worry about anything. The Lord is at hand. By prayer and with humility take whatever troubles you may have and cast them on the one who has given you every good thing forever. Here you will be at peace. As Paul writes: “And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

The peace that Paul is talking about is the peace that all is well with us and he who made us. The destination to be with the Lord is still ours. In the midst of troubles and all things that might make us afraid we look to Jesus who promises that faith will be fulfilled in love and hope will not be disappointed. This is a faith that cannot be achieved by any human effort but only “... in the Lord.” The atheist says: “Why believe in a God? Just be good for goodness’ sake.” But there is no goodness in us that can save us from ourselves and the mess we have made. Being good for goodness’ sake is meaningless. Peace and Joy is not something that can ever be achieved by us. This is something that is given to us as a gift, as angels proclaimed to the shepherds: “... *good news of great joy* ... for all the people ... unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord ... Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace ...”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott