

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
Newark, DE
Third Sunday in Advent – December 17, 2017/Year B
The Reverend Elizabeth Masterson

Well, it's the third Sunday of Advent, and we have lighted two violet or blue candles and one rose candle this morning. Whatever their color, our Advent wreath candles symbolize our waiting for the light of Christ to come into this world.

Why rose candle? The rose candle reminds us about the tension between two ideas during the season of Advent. On one hand, during Advent we are encouraged to reflect on our need to repent our sins and on God's judgment of humanity's sinfulness at the end of time. But on the other hand we need to remember with joy God's love for us. Indeed, we will celebrate God's supreme act of love in just eight days. On Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, we will celebrate God's coming to live as one of us, God's becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. The anticipation of our joy that will come with the birth of Jesus finds expression in the rose candle.

The tension between God's love for us and our sinfulness can be heard in the words of our Collect for the third Sunday in Advent. A few minutes ago you heard me read this prayer to God, “. . . because we are sorely hindered by

our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us.”

Jesus came at a particular time in history, continues to come in our hearts and lives, and will come again at the end of time as the expression of God’s grace and mercy to humanity. That is our Christian hope and the reason we come together to worship God.

So what’s the problem? Why do we continue to find ourselves at the point of tension between sin and grace, between judgment and mercy, between what the violet candles stand for and what the rose candle represents?

In commentary on the passage we heard from Isaiah today, a scholar posed this question: “What is it like to hear such words of hope and promise, when they stand in apparent disjunction with the present reality?” [Repeat]

The rather academic-sounding phrase “in apparent disjunction” does appear to be just right phrase to help us understand the dilemma of Advent. That point of tension between sin and grace, judgment and mercy, hope and what we know about the pain of the world—the phrase “in apparent disjunction” nails our uncomfortable spiritual state.

Some of us may go so far as to become quite disgruntled about Christmas and frantic living that precedes it. This disgruntled feeling stems from the present reality of our secular Christmas hoopla of shopping and parties. It may

also arise from the discomfort that comes from wishing for a different reality and being unable to bring it about. The present reality of sin—greed, lust, coveting and the like—appears so strongly in what we might call the secular season of pre-Christmas! Sometimes the pressures in this season become too much for us to cope with and still be true to the best that is within us.

Keeping a holy Advent offers us a different way to approach Christmas—not to hate the world, but to find joy while we live in the tension between the way the world is and what we hope our world could be. Paul’s first letter to the Thessalonians directly addresses the tension. No world could be more challenging to live out one’s Christian faith than the world of the Roman Empire. Our world has the internet and television to bring all of the world’s greed and violence right into our homes. But times were just as full of greed and violence in first century Palestine.

So St. Paul said to the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; . . .” What in the world is Paul suggesting they—and we—do? Is he saying to live joyfully no matter what—to live joyfully as the symbol of the rose candle in the midst of the violet ones suggests? Are we supposed to be thankful that our choice to live a Christian life always means living in tension between our Christian hope and current reality?

I understand St. Paul's admonition does ask us to live with a thankful, joyful attitude even in the midst of circumstances for which no one can give thanks. On this side of heaven, until God brings in a new heaven and a new earth, there will always be evil. There will always be people who make sinful choices leading others to suffer. We should most certainly not give thanks for such circumstances.

Yes, we recognize the tension between our present reality and our hope for peace with justice in the reign of God. But we must trust that God's yearns for us to live joyfully, faithfully and hopefully in our present reality—the world as it is. And as we do our best to live as God yearns for us to live, we will find God's loving presence—often manifested in the words and actions of another person—especially where and when we least expect it.

So on this third Sunday of Advent, as we gaze upon the newly lighted rose candle, let us find joy—joy that will strengthen us to look for the power of God and the faithfulness of God in all circumstances. Strengthened by that joy we can live in whatever tension we find ourselves. Strengthened by that joy we can resist the evil in the world and in ourselves. Strengthened by that joy we can, with thanksgiving, claim the grace and mercy God-in-Christ has promised us.