



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

3rd Sunday of Advent: 12/16/2018

Sermon Title: “It’s an imperfect world...”

Sermon Text: Luke 3:7-18 and Phil. 4:4-7

Christmas will be here in just 9 days. We all want the same thing – a *perfect* Christmas holiday in which *all* of our loved ones gather around a table that is *perfectly set* and engage in *perfectly polite* conversation as a *perfectly prepared* Christmas feast is placed before them. In the glow of a *perfectly decorated* home, everyone gradually makes their way to the living room with a cup of *perfectly brewed* coffee and marvel at the tree that is *perfectly trimmed* and surrounded by *perfectly wrapped* presents. The children, who have been *perfectly behaved*, carefully but excitedly tear open the gifts and exclaim, “Oh my! It’s just what I wanted! This is *perfect!*” As the night ends, you sink into bed with a sleepy, contented smile because you’ve just experienced the most *perfect* Christmas ever.

That, of course, is the fantasy we cling to at Christmas time. But the real story of most of our Christmas gatherings is anything *but* perfect. In the real world, the family is scattered across the country, and the conversation among those who do show up quickly devolves into a fight about politics. Something goes awry in the kitchen and the ham gets burnt, and someone spills coffee all over your new carpet as they go to see your tree, which is bone dry, dropping needles everywhere, and sporting several strings of burned out lights. The kids are bored and start quarreling until they get the green light to open presents, which they attack like crazed badgers, only to discover that the clothes are the wrong size and the wrong color, and the toys are not at *all* what they wanted. As the night mercifully comes to an end, you just want to collapse into bed and forget that this day ever happened because you’ve just experienced the worst Christmas ever. But sometimes that’s how it goes. **It’s an imperfect world.**

We put way too much pressure on our families, our friends and ourselves when we expect a perfect Christmas. We’re humans, and we’re going to make mistakes and fall short. We look longingly at the greeting cards we receive at Christmas with their illustrations of little snow-covered villages dotted with quaint cottages, with smoke gently curling from the chimneys, and we think *this* is reality. We watch the old black and white movies like *It’s a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* and we think *they* are portraying *real life*. But in fact what we’re doing is mistaking *fantasy* for *reality* and so we end up depressed and discouraged because we’re living imperfect lives in an **imperfect world**.

But it doesn’t stop at Christmas. We come to church also expecting to be surrounded by perfection. Before long though, we learn that the people of our faith lives – be they prophets, pastors, or parishioners in the pews – are still people. They are imperfect, and we set ourselves up for immense disappointment if we come to this church or any other church *expecting*

perfection. Besides, you don't need to look to a mere person to be your savior. You already have a savior, and his name is Jesus Christ.

Today's Gospel lesson offers us a prime illustration of the imperfect world of our faith. Did you hear how John the Baptist opened his sermon to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him? He looked over the assembly and said, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" Now *that* wasn't very pastoral! I doubt any of you would appreciate a sermon opener like that! John wasn't exactly a "warm and fuzzy" kind of guy and probably turned a lot of people off. But sometimes that's how it goes. **It's an imperfect world.**

John of course wasn't the only sharp-tongued theologian the world ever produced. Our own Martin Luther was a man with a gift for devastating rhetoric, earthy put-downs and blush-inducing insults. No person was too big or too important to escape Luther's wrath if that's what Luther thought was necessary. For example, let me share just a couple choice lines from a little pamphlet Luther wrote in 1545. He describes his opponent like this: "You are the scum of all the scoundrels. You are an abominable arch-heretic. You are desperate, thorough arch-rascals, murderers, traitors, liars, the very scum of all the most evil people on earth. You are full of all the worst devils in hell - full, full, and so full that you can do nothing but vomit, throw, and blow out devils!"¹

Luther certainly had a way with words, but his bluntness sometimes caused him a lot of trouble and undoubtedly stirred up emotions when it might have been better had cooler heads prevailed. But sometimes that's how it goes. **It's an imperfect world.**

Friends, as these stories illustrate, it's unrealistic and unfair to expect that your fellow Christians will be perfect. It's even more devastating to your *own* well-being when you impose an impossible standard of perfection on yourself. I'm not suggesting that we should water down our faith or give up striving to lead righteous lives of Christian discipleship. But I repeat – we are doomed to disappointment if we look to ourselves or any person in the church to be our savior. We already have a savior, and his name is Jesus Christ.

So, how *do* we retain our sanity and make sense of this **imperfect world**, especially as it pertains to the church? Paul answers that question in today's reading from Philippians. Evidently, two leaders of the church in Philippi were engaged in a serious dispute that threatened the wellbeing of the entire assembly. It was so bad that Paul enlisted others in the church to help find a resolution. But Paul did not leave the church unequipped. In the verses we heard today, he gave them a simple, three-step prescription for *peace in the midst of imperfection*:

First, rejoice in the Lord always. Jesus invites us to see the world through grateful, joyful eyes. That doesn't mean that *our* dreams are always going to come true... but a rejoicing heart enables us to let go of the unimportant things of this life and to dream *God's dream*... and God's dreams do come true.

Second, be gentle... both with others and with yourself. Accept that everyone around you is going to make plenty of mistakes. You're going to make your share of mistakes too. So be patient. Speak softly. Assume the best about others, and love without reservation.

Finally, trust that the Lord is near. Jesus loves you and cares about you. So let go of anxieties over the stuff that, in the eternal scheme of things, really doesn't matter. *Drop* to your *knees* in prayer to your loving Savior, and there, *drop* your *burdens* at the foot of his cross.

These three simple steps represent a radical change of attitude in a world that's fueled by competition, anxiety, self-worship, and the pursuit of perfection in meaningless endeavors. But the one who rejoices in the Lord... the one who is gentle... the one who trusts that the Lord is near... discovers an indescribable treasure: the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding; a peace that will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. *This is a peace you will not find anywhere else.*

Friends, we live in a world that oftentimes feels stressful, frustrating, and graceless. But in the midst of our **imperfect world**, Jesus Christ provides the perfect prescription: the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding. *Especially* in this season, may *Christ's* peace be *your* peace. Amen.

Cites:

1. Luther's Works Vol. 41, pp. 270, 272, 277.