

Third Sunday in Advent – Epistle

FORGET GODZWILLA, JESUS RULES!

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Third Sunday in Advent

Analysis by Jerome Burce

16 Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil. 23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

Preface

One of the preacher's toughest jobs, week in and week out, is figuring out who he's preaching to this time. The Word, after all, insists on laying a real cross over the real lives of real people. But most preaching audiences are composed of many people whose taste of day by day reality varies widely. Grandma's big battle is with arthritis, while Granddaughter's is with dysfunctional social structures at her high school. To which of these shall the preacher preach first? Who then gets stuck with the heavier lifting as she attempts-and all hearers are obliged to do this-to cross herself with the preacher's words? (I am writing in shorthand, of course, trusting that you who read this

will get what I'm driving at.) The point is that the preacher has to choose somebody, or some class of somebodies, as his primary audience. This choice can only be made to the lesser edification of others in the crowd. But to avoid choosing-to try, that is, to preach equally to all the people all the time-is to wind up spouting platitudinous generalities that lay Christ's cross on no one at all.

In the following I aim the cross of the present pericope at a fairly narrow slice of the usual preacher's usual audience. Some may find the slice too narrow, even extreme. To this I would have two rejoinders. i) People sitting in the extremities of the congregation (and every congregation has its extremities) are the ones that broad preaching, aimed at the perceived majority, most often misses. So maybe it's their turn this Sunday. ii) Unless the preacher's Gospel works for such as these, it isn't yet The Gospel.

Note

The key monster metaphor, Steps 3 and 4 below, first came to my attention in student days. I can't remember which of my fellow smart-alecky seminarians to applaud for it.

DIAGNOSIS: Rejoice!? Fuhrgedabowdit!

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *A Nose in the Air*
Sam Singledad is in no mood these days for imperatives, least of all the batch that Pr. Paul is peppering the crowd with this morning. Christmas looms, maximally unmerry. How could it be otherwise? Sally is gone, so recently that the thin walls of the new apartment, bare and boxy, are still leaking the sounds of midnight weeping from the children's bedroom into his. Yes, it was his fault-but also hers. He committed the sin-but she retained it, vengefully. Then she absconded to another life elsewhere, leaving him with far more debt than one salary will manage. The house went first, the SUV tomorrow. Between work and

double-duty on the home front, the daily pace is suddenly brutal. As he stumbled through yesterday's hours so now he slumps in the far corner of the back pew, looking somehow drugged by the stew of grief, rage, guilt, and anxiety for the kids that bubbles within. Ergo the conversation: "Rejoice!" barks Pr. Paul. "Get real!" answers Sam. Pr. Paul: "Pray without ceasing!" Sam: "Done that. Where did it get me?" Paul: "Give thanks in all circumstances!" Sam: "Who, me? How about thanks for nuthin'!" Paul: "Abstain from every evil!" Sam: "Too late for that one, pal!" [Blessed, by the way, be honest hearers.] Preaching, of course, is prophecy, in essence the transmission of the Word and will (v. 18b) of the Lord. Notice how we've caught Sam in the act of despising it (v. 20)

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Unsound*

Fact is, Pr. Paul's preaching beats on Sam, so badly that he can't bear the sound of it. Why is that? Because right now, this morning, Sam himself is unsound in spirit, soul, and dismally postured body (contra v. 23). See above, for example, concerning his emotional state. Why is he unsound? Pretty good guess #1: because he long ago made the common mistake of thinking that being called into God's "kingdom and glory" (2:12) meant lots of sparkle and ever-present pizzazz-the (materially) abundant life that he may have heard the radio preachers carrying on about. Pretty good guess #2: because when the glory sparks failed to fly he quit testing everything and consciously loosened his hold on "what is good" (v. 21). Hence, for example, his role in the mess with Sally. Hence too the guilt, the shame, the sense of failure, the sheer physical exhaustion, etc., etc. Call him heartsick, for so he is. In more ways than one.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *A Monster Blame Game*

And not only is Sam unsound, he is also not "blameless" (v. 23). Anything but. Sally blames him, the kids blame him, his own mother tells him to lie in the bed he was dumb enough to make.

He blames himself. But listening to Pr. Paul, he also blames God. For if, as Paul promises, God Himself will take responsibility for keeping him sound and blameless (again, v. 23), hasn't God let him down? Does it not then border on the grotesque for God to be yapping at him, via Paul, to put on a happy face, and to say please and thank you, and all the rest of it? Note the pickle Sam is in. Not only won't he buy today's commands, he can't buy them. Told to give thanks "in all circumstances," (Sam: "What? THESE circumstances?!") he can only get angry at the God whose "will...for you" it is (v. 18). This leaves him, again in apparent contradiction of a Pr. Paul promise, destined for wrath (4:9). Say "God's will" five times very fast in a tent-preacher's accent and what have you got? Sam vs. Godzwillla. Guess who stomps whom.

PROGNOSIS: Rejoice!? Bring on the Party!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – A Monster at Peace

Go back three sentences (in Step 3). Notice how that ellipsis apparently addresses the will of God but leaves out the crux of the matter (that is, the cross of Jesus Christ) altogether. So Pr. Paul starts filling in. "Dear Sam, dear hearers all, that will of God I'm talking about is God's will for you 'in Christ Jesus.' There is nothing monstrous at all about it, save for the monstrosity by which Godzwillla stomped God's Christ for your sake. Where you're concerned God-in Christ Jesus-is nothing less nor other than 'the God of peace' (v. 23). Because of Jesus, crucified, God's first words to you are 'Grace and peace' (1:1c). Grace is God's final word to you as well (4:25). Do you get it, Sam? God's will for you, the thing he wants above all else for you-right now, this morning-is to hear how he has made his own peace with you in Christ. Forget Godzwillla! Jesus rules!"

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Sound. Better Still, Sanctified.*

At last, something the sound of which Sam can abide this morning, something which also serves to undo his unsoundness. Behold, then, the true self-fulfilling prophecy, also known as the Word that does not return to God void. As Pr. Paul preaches the Gospel, i.e., as he stuffs into the ellipsis the Christ who belongs there, the God of peace is busily making peace in Sam's own heart. How? By sanctifying him "entirely" (v. 23). At its most basic, "to sanctify" means "to set apart." To sanctify something involves detaching it from one thing and associating it with another. Pr. Paul, properly preaching, detaches Sam's attention from his own feelings and circumstances. Then he reattaches it to God's feeling (God's will, where "will" equals "desire") for him in Christ. Does this have an effect on Sam's spirit, Sam's soul? How can it not? Notice now the difference even in Sam's body. He's sitting up and listening. Gladly, even. So it is that Paul's prayer for Sam's sanctification is getting answered even as Pr. Paul speaks.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *A Nose to the Ground*

To be sure, the raw realities of Sam's daily sojourn remain as they were, tough and tiring. But these too are suddenly sanctified by the same Word of Christ that sanctifies Sam. They function differently than they did. Then they were a stick under Sam's chin, shoving his nose skyward in rebellious objection to Paul's imperatives. Now they're more like a flesh-drawing magnet. They pluck Sam's nose out of the air and draw it downward. They attract him as the first and best place to find out how God is faithful and how "he will do this" (v. 24), i.e., how he will keep him "sound and blameless" even through circumstances like these. In Christ single parenthood-any other vocation, for that matter-is a holy adventure, at the end of

which is the joy of “the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 23b). Sam, embracing this, is about to become a living sermon of the prophecy he’d despised. Chances are that somebody, noticing his good cheer this week-a pal at work, perhaps; Sally, if and when she calls from her “new life” to check in with the kids-will be annoyed by it. Hey, thanks be to God!