

**Sermon Preached
By Doug King
December 15th 2002
Advent III
First Thessalonians 5:16-22**

There are few things I dislike more than being told what to do. There is nothing quite like a biblical imperative to weigh you down with that I wish I could be out playing but I have too much homework to do feeling. Unfortunately this morning's text from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians is all about imperatives. One scholar notes that this section of the text "is sometimes labeled 'Paul's shotgun paraenesis' because Paul quickly fires off one round of imperatives after another." Rejoice, pray, give thanks, do not quench, do not despise, test everything, hold fast, abstain. It feels like another list of holiday responsibilities to leave us weary and out of sorts.

We just finished reveling in the wonderful re-enactment of the incarnation by our Sunday school children but I am already feeling that warm and fuzzy feeling fade as I face this mountainous to do list of faith that we face. Why can't Paul give us a break from all of the ordering around during advent and save the lectures for lent? Unfortunately advent is not just about warm and fuzzy, it is also about preparing ourselves for the arrival of the Christ so we do need to grapple with Paul and his imperatives.

The initial three imperatives are the most intriguing to me. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for you." These are all commands to worship. Rejoicing, and praying and giving thanks are all actions we are doing this morning and we do every Sunday morning. We do not need to be told twice to do these things they are a natural part of our life together. Of course there is a catch. Paul does not say rejoice, pray and give thanks on Sunday mornings in the sanctuary. Paul informs us that it is God's will for us to engage in these activities always, without ceasing, in all circumstances. We are being

called not to lives that attend worship on Sunday morning but lives that are worshipful in all that we do.

One theologian writes "Like a game—or a good novel—worship enfolds for a time into a way of seeing the world. It is the one hour in the week when an entire community acknowledges a world where God rules, where evil is named, where hope abounds, where the Spirit is on the move." Paul is challenging us to see the world this way not just in our sanctuary time but in every moment of our lives. This is some task, preparing for the arrival of the Christ child. How can we be worshipful in every moment of our lives when the demands at work are unreasonable, and the kids are screaming at each other, and the roof is leaking, and we do not know from where the money will come to pay for it? How do we rejoice when the X-ray has a suspicious smudge or we finally realize the marriage cannot be salvaged?

These imperatives from Paul are either the most profound advice we have ever received or the most foolish. I, myself have never been a big fan of "let a smile be your umbrella" answers to the painful complications we face in our living. But I do not believe Paul is speaking in such glib and shallow terms. The scholar Abraham Smith writes that "Paul presupposes that life's depths, not solely its surfaces, must arrest our attention. Paul Tillich speaks of the 'depth of existence' as the 'ground of our historical life...the ultimate depth of history.' Tillich's words are not a call for residency near such shallow waters, where thoughts are restricted to appearances near the shore. Yet, most of us live near such shallow waters. And we judge our lives by visible, surface, and indeed superficial determinants—that is the occasional good things or bad things that happen to us."

As we prepare for the Christ child's arrival we are called to live our lives not governed by the frustrations and difficulties which we all encounter but with a vision of a much larger canvas. The hustle and bustle, and highs and lows of our everyday lives are obviously the central element of our understanding of the world. But Paul is calling us to pull the focus back a bit to view all that surrounds our lives. Everything that happens to

us is always surrounded by God's loving care. This does not protect us from being hurt and damaged by this world. What it does do is provide us with the promise of who is present with us and of where it all will end, in the loving arms of our creator for all of eternity made whole and alive in ways beyond our current comprehension.

This is the promise that comes on the lips and in the life of the child whose birth we await. When we allow our vision of our lives to be framed by such an expansive promise we can find the glorious freedom, even in the midst of our pain, to recognize that this is indeed a world where God rules, hope abounds, and the Spirit is on the move. In such a world we can allow ourselves the gift of rejoicing always, and praying without ceasing, and giving thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God. Amen.