

**The Episcopal Church in Parker County**  
Aledo, Texas  
Sermon for December 14, 2014 ~ Advent 3B  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul exhorts Christians to be people who always rejoice, always pray, and always give thanks. How in the world does one go about living such a life? It is a very important question to ponder since, as St. Paul says, it is God's will for us.

***To rejoice*** does not mean simply to adopt a positive attitude, cheer up, or have a nice disposition. To rejoice means to be centered in the joy that comes from having been joined to Christ in the waters of Baptism and thus in his ultimate victory. That joy in our lives is born of the awareness that no darkness can ever overcome the Light to whom we belong. During his darkest moments Martin Luther clung to the words, "I am Baptized." Our baptism is a current event as much as it a past event. We hold it present with us as the gift of God – the gift that keeps on giving – the gift by which God says, "You are worthy of my love." In every circumstance, this is all the reason we need to rejoice!

***To pray*** without ceasing does not mean to spend our days on our knees with our nose in the Book of Common Prayer. Prayer on our knees, alone or together, using the prayer book is an essential part of the life we are called to live. Those prayers are extended as we grow in conscious contact with God during our routine daily activities. Brother Lawrence called it "practicing the presence of God." In this conscious, constant dialogue with the Divine, our offering of all that we see, do, and think encounters God who is constantly giving himself to us. God is with us. We are never alone. In every circumstance, this is all the reason we need to pray!

***To give thanks*** in all circumstances does not mean to give thanks FOR all circumstances. Not every circumstance is a cause for thanksgiving. Many circumstances are not God's doing. But no circumstance is beyond God's reach. When we know that, we look more carefully to discern God's hand at work for good, God's power at work to overcome evil, God's mercy at work to heal and transform. What we see is not all that is there and gratitude opens our eyes to see what God wants us to see. In every circumstance, this all the reason we need to give thanks!

So, rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks always are expressions of a life that is conscious of God and conscious of the circumstances in which we live our lives moment by moment, breath by breath.

Six years ago, Gay and I were living in Galveston, Texas. Our community and our parish were still in the early stages of cleaning up after Hurricane Ike. Three months after the storm, many of our neighbors were still not able to live in their homes. Rising water had inundated our church offices, parish hall, classrooms, and school. The nave of the church, which had 18 inches of filthy water over the floor, had been cleaned up, but all the electrical lines were destroyed and we were operating on temporary power. There was no air conditioning or heat. Along about that time, during Advent, I remember someone saying to me that life there in these circumstances was an "emotional roller coaster." One day, you make a little progress toward normalcy; the next day you have a setback.

Some of you and many of our neighbors who have been struggling with the ups and downs of the economy, global cultural changes, family circumstances, health issues, understand exactly what that

means! For some, this season is never a happy one because it reminds them of people and experiences they'd rather forget. In the midst of any experience of life that is difficult, we need to hear St. Paul's words again. His exhortation to always rejoice, pray, and give thanks grounds us and centers us in a normalcy that can't be conquered by the ups and downs of life.

The truth is, the more we rejoice, pray, and give thanks, the more conscious we are of the presence and power of God at work in us leading us through the present with all its ups and downs and into a hope-filled future. For it is not the divine will for us to draw life from the circumstances, up or down, but from our relationship with God, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all life. Even now during these days of Advent, God is coming to us in power and might to make of us more than we can make of ourselves. In every circumstance, that is all the reason we need to rejoice, pray, and give thanks! So, let's do it – always.