

One week. We have one week left to shop before Christmas Day. For all you procrastinators out there, that means you have one week to pull something together for that special someone in your life. One week to buy that fruitcake that would make a great doorstop. One week to buy that tie that looks like the dog just threw up all over it. One week to order that generic gift basket that no one wants. One week to shop around and fight over parking spaces. One week to buy that toy. You know the toy I'm talking about. The one that looks really good in the picture but then when you open the box there are those three dreaded words: some assembly required!

I don't know about you but I love to shop on Christmas Eve. I don't like to shop any other time during the year, but I like to shop on Christmas Eve. I like the adrenalin rush of knowing that this is it. No more I'll think about it or I'll come back and look at it'; it's time to make a decision. Yes, I know that things are picked over by that day. I know that the crowds at the malls and different stores are horrendous. I know I'm crazy, but nonetheless, there is still something I like about shopping on Christmas Eve. For all those of you who are wondering how long our Christmas Eve service will be, let me reassure you it won't be long. Chances are I might be making a last minute shopping run that evening.

I love this time of year, but I'm also aware that this time of year is painful for many people. It's painful for those who are grieving because of loved ones who are no longer with us to share in the traditions of Christmas. It's painful for those who are struggling to make ends meet. It's an anxious time of year for all those who have too much going on. With all that being said, it's still Christmas and it's time to rejoice. It's time to rejoice not because we got that gift for our sister on sale. It's time to rejoice not because we got a good parking spot at Wal-Mart. It's time to rejoice not because we actually put that toy together in under four hours! It's time to rejoice because, as Paul said in Philippians, "The Lord is near." We are getting closer and closer to Christmas Day -- the day in which we remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, and that is definitely something worth rejoicing about.

It might seem unusual to some of you that I am preaching a sermon out of Philippians one week before Christmas. You probably have never equated Philippians with the Advent season, but odd as it may seem, this text

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is perfect. It's perfect because it reminds us to rejoice in the Lord always. It reminds us that God did not create us to simply exist. You and I were not born to grow up, work, raise kids, pay bills, and then die. If that is all there is to this life then I feel sorry for all of us. If just getting by is all there is, then God has played a cruel joke on us. But you and I both know that is not true. You and I know that we can rejoice in our salvation in Jesus and that there is more to life than meets the eye.

Children are such a good reminder to all of us about what it means to be joyful and to rejoice. I was dropping Andrew off at the preschool the other day and couldn't help but notice all the Christmas decorations. The preschool definitely looks festive. There is one decoration in particular that I like. It's a singing Christmas tree. It's one of these that activates when you walk by. The tree even has a mouth. I love watching the kids' reactions. Some of them just stare at it in amazement. They try to put two and two together but just can't seem to understand how this tree is able to sing. I guess those kids are future engineers! Others notice the tree and start laughing immediately. These kids really don't care how it works; they are just amused by the whole thing. Incidentally, that is the category I would fall into! Some of the kids don't stare at it or laugh, they just start dancing. They are so overjoyed by this singing tree that they can't help themselves.

I think if we were to be honest about it and really come face to face with the reality of Christmas, we would all be dancing and rejoicing. God decided to become one of us and in the process provide for our salvation, and if you and I really embrace that truth then how on earth could we not rejoice and be thankful? How could any of us walk out of this sanctuary this morning and not have a sense of joyfulness?

Paul talked not only about how we should rejoice in the Lord always and everywhere, but also how the Lord is near. I think that is a comforting thought -- the Lord is near. We do not worship a distant God who is detached from His creation. We worship a God who is intimately involved in our lives, but sometimes we forget that God is right there with us.

Last week there was a story on the news about the Kim family. The Kim family was traveling through Oregon over the week of Thanksgiving when they got stuck in a terrible snow storm. Thirty-five year-old James Kim was traveling with his wife and two daughters, Penelope and Sabine. The Kims had traveled from San Francisco to Seattle for Thanksgiving and

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were on their way home. They planned to spend the night at a nice lodge on the coast. Driving south on Interstate 5, the Kims had missed the turnoff to the coast and instead drove through the Siskiyou National Forest. They passed through signs warning that Bear Camp Road may be blocked, but kept going. At the time, James had to stick his head out the window to see through the falling snow. By the time they turned around, they were fifteen miles off Bear Camp Road and stopped where they hoped to be spotted from the air, fearing they were running out of gas. They stayed in the car as it snowed for three days. They had only baby food, jelly and bottled water. When the bottled water ran out, they melted snow. When the food ran out, Kati Kim nursed the children.

On the eighth day, James Kim decided to look for help. Unfortunately, James Kim died of hypothermia in his efforts to find help in the snowy wilderness. The irony of his death is that he died not one mile from a fishing lodge near Big Windy Creek. The lodge had not only shelter, but also months worth of food according to authorities. It's a tragic story and James Kim was certainly heroic in his efforts to save his family. Thankfully, his family was rescued and his two girls and wife are fine.

When I read this story I thought about how there are so many of us who are literally dying spiritually while we are so close to God. Just like James Kim was so close to shelter and food, we too are close to our spiritual shelter and food, but sometimes we forget it. Christmas means so many different things to so many different people, but for us as Christians it is a reminder that God loves us so much that He decided to become one of us and get even closer to us. The Lord is indeed near us! The Lord is right beside you, right in front of you, and right behind you all the days of your life. God is our constant companion.

I realize that God is not visible. We do not literally see God walking beside us or in front of us throughout the day, but we do get those glimpses from time to time that remind that God is closer than we think. We just have to be open enough to see what God is doing in our lives.

Last Tuesday a group of us went to the State School for a Christmas party with the Epiphany Boys. We got together and sang Christmas carols, told the Christmas story, ate cookies and cake, and the boys opened presents. It was a great time. After the party was over the boys were dismissed to go back to their rooms. They were so excited because each one of them had a

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paper bag with all kinds of goodies in them. Keep in mind that most of these boys had never received much of anything at all, especially gifts. You know what one of those boys did as he left the room? He reached into his bag and pulled out a piece of chocolate candy, and instead of opening it up and eating it; he gave it to me and said, "Merry Christmas."

I don't know what the Lord looks like. I've never seen Him. But I have been given a piece of candy from a boy who didn't have much to give, and I was reminded once again, in the most unlikely of places and times, that the Lord is near and there is reason to rejoice!