Winter of Our Discontent
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A sermon by
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Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

“The winter of our discontent”: You may recognize the sermon title today as something from Shakespeare. This phrase comes from the opening line of one of my favorite Shakespeare plays, Richard III.

A fascinating and powerful production of Richard III is currently on world tour, with Kevin Spacey in the title role. I didn’t get to see it when it was in San Francisco last month, but it brought this play to mind – especially the opening scene.

The play begins with an extended monologue by the deformed and villainous Richard, who speaks directly to the audience; and thus he enlists us, from the outset, as co-conspirators in his evil plots.

“The winter of our discontent” sounds negative, but in its original context, it is actually part of a positive statement. The full quote is:

“Now is the winter of our discontent
made into glorious summer by this son of York.
And all the clouds that lowered upon our house
are in the deep bosom of the ocean buried.”

In other words, the gloomy, unhappy times are over! Winter has turned into “glorious summer,” and all the clouds have disappeared. That’s because Richard’s
family, the House of York, now has been restored to the throne of England - in the person of his brother, King Edward IV.

However, we soon discover that the gloom has not been dispelled from Richard! He is filled to the brim with discontent. And so, the play revolves around his ruthless and bitter ambition to be something other than he is.

Well, “discontent” is an appropriate theme for a sermon these days. We Americans seem to be going through our own “winter of discontent.” We are deeply frustrated with the economy, the government, the banking industry - and especially the crony capitalism that runs Washington.

It is no wonder that the “Occupy Wall Street” movement has caught the public’s imagination. We may not agree with their tactics, and we cringe at the increasing violence between police and demonstrators; but many, many of us resonate with the issues the Occupiers have raised: the huge injustice in our country, with the rich getting richer and more powerful, while the poor suffer, and the middle class keeps getting squeezed.

There’s plenty of discontent about politics, with more than 90% of Americans saying they disapprove of Congress. And the apparent failure of the Super-Committee is one just more sign of how dysfunctional they are.

Most Americans, including many Democrats, are dissatisfied with the performance of President Obama. But people are expressing a lot of discontent over the Republican presidential candidates, as well.

Meanwhile, health care costs continue to skyrocket, support for our schools and colleges continues to decline, endless and pointless wars go on and on, while critical environmental issues are ignored.

This is a time of enormous public discontent in America.

Now, on the other hand, when it comes to our personal lives, most of us feel quite differently. As we cele-
brate Thanksgiving this week, my guess is that most of us are reasonably content and thankful about our lives. For when we stop and count our blessings, we soon realize that we have a lot to be thankful for.

There is so much that you and I take for granted, things that many human beings will never experience in their lives – like clean air and good clean water, personal safety, and plenty of food to eat. You and I have people who love us; we have opportunities to use our talents in meaningful ways. We have access to good medical care. We have cars, computers, and cell phones; we have warm houses and nice clothes.

We are richly blessed.

On the other hand, no one's life is perfect. We all have our problems. The stress and pressures of modern life exact a toll on all of us. And there are some among us who have an awful lot to deal with right now: grief for what has been lost, or fear and uncertainty about what tomorrow will bring.

And all of this forms the great, bubbling mixture of gratitude and sorrow, contentment and discontentment, that we bring to the season of Thanksgiving; as we sing “Come, ye thankful people, come.”

But one thing I have discovered, in my long experience as a pastor, is that, good times and bad, in season and out of season, there remains in most of us a kind of restlessness: a certain level of discontent.

Perhaps this is just part of our personality as Americans, I don’t know. But this is a recurring theme that I have heard, again and again, over the years: that we are not content. We are not content with our country, with our lives, our jobs, our relationships, whatever.

The more we pursue “happiness,” the more it seems to elude us. The more we have, the more we want. The more we achieve, the more we yearn for greater success. The more we expect from ourselves as parents, the more we end up feeling inadequate to the task.

We are a restless people, who seem to have trouble finding lasting contentment.
So... With this in mind, let’s turn to the scriptures for today. Bette just read for us words that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians, nearly 2000 years ago:

“I have learned to be content with whatever happens to me. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of being sick or in good health, of having too much or too little. I know I can do all things through the One who strengthens me.”

It’s an amazing passage.

You know, some people have trouble with the New Testament because of the miracle stories – Jesus walking on water or restoring sight to a blind man. Those things don’t bother me much. But it’s passages like this one that strain credibility and that, to me, seem truly miraculous: the Apostle Paul, given all that the things he went through, saying that “he is content” no matter what.

I mean, “to be content” sounds not only elusive, but faintly illicit. How dare we be content, when the world is in such a mess, and our lives are so far from perfect? If “being content” means settling for less; if it means making do and compromising, then, no thanks! Contentment is not a worthwhile goal.

But, maybe this is not quite what Paul had in mind when he said, “In any and all circumstances, I am content.” His contentment, apparently, is not the same thing as complacency, or a passive attitude.

Contentment: what images does this word conjure up for you? Do you associate it with that well-earned sigh, as you step back from a task you have just successfully completed?

Do you picture a baby who has just nursed at her mother’s breast, and who now snuggles in close? Both mother and child are content.

Or maybe contentment is the word to describe that moment that will come sometime in the afternoon on Thanksgiving Day, when the great feast has been consumed, the dishes are done, you’ve got no place to go,
nothing you “should be doing” - and everything seems right with the world. Now, that’s contentment.

However, none of these lovely, placid scenarios has much to do with the Apostle Paul. After all, Paul lived the life of a rabble-rouser and a pot-stirrer. He was an “in-your-face,” outspoken kind of guy.

And do you realize where Paul was, when he wrote these lovely words about contentment? Well, he was in a prison cell, probably chained to a wall in a dark and filthy Roman prison, after being thrown in jail, yet again.

Fact is, Paul was always right smack in the middle of some dispute. That’s because he was a man of great passion, who was on fire with the gospel of Jesus Christ. And, he spread that fire to so many others.

We can tell from his letters that Paul was often frustrated and impatient. He does not seem to be “content” with himself, or with the world, or with the churches that he started.

So, I find it quite striking that it is none other than Paul who says, “No matter what, I am content.” He surely was describing something deeper than the absence of turmoil and conflict. And he must have had something else in mind, than our typical, placid, picture of contentment.

For it was in the midst of all his pot-stirring, passionate activities and controversies, that Paul somehow found contentment. He apparently has some inner peace. He writes, “I have learned the secret. So that anywhere, in any circumstance, I am content.” Which sounds wonderful.

It’s a secret we’d like to know, in the “winter of our discontent,” as we berate ourselves internally for our various shortcomings, or for that dumb thing we did yesterday, or for all the things we intend to do but haven’t: all the “shoulds” that roll around inside our heads.

Or we wonder where all the money went this month, and how we are going to pay the bills, and how we can afford Christmas presents. We struggle with difficult decisions. We have a fight with our spouse or our kids, or with a friend. And then we agonize over it, trying to sep-
arate out our own hurt feelings and wounds, and see things from the other person’s point of view.

We are anything but content with our government, with the economy, with the outlook for the future for our children. We worry over things that lie ahead. We grieve for persons and for times now past. We have furrowed brows, and tension headaches, and upset stomachs.

How wonderful it would be to stop fretting, and be content. We want that inner peace and contentment of which Paul spoke so boldly. “In any and all circumstances,” he said, “I am content.” We wish we could say the same.

So. What is this secret? What is the key that will unlock the door to an abiding sense of peace and contentment in our lives?

Well, Paul spells it out in the last verse of the passage. “For I can do all things through the One who strengthens me.” What Paul is referring to here is his deep and abiding relationship with God. He is talking about trust, and a sense of well-being, that is not easily shaken.

Trust in God. This really is the answer to our discontent. And I don’t pretend to be telling you something that you don’t already know, at some level of your being.

For you and I know full well that conditions will never be perfect. We know that our circumstances will never be secure enough to offer true and lasting peace. Nothing in this life is nailed down. Nothing is forever.

There are no guarantees, about anything. Somehow, just like our brother Paul, we have to look beyond our current conditions and circumstances.

If we seek true contentment, we must look to a deeper reality, a reality that is not conditional, and not subject to the whims of fate or the stock market, or hormone changes, or mid-life crises, or the political climate, or even the loss of a loved one.

We must look to a reality that will not change and that cannot be pulled out from under us. What this means to me, is that we must come to terms with the One
who is the Ground of our Being, the One who holds all the cards, and who holds us in the Everlasting Arms: the one, true God, who is the Truth beyond all truth.

Through Jesus Christ, we have learned that we can put our trust in this God; because the One who has all the power over us, loves us. We can be content, we can be at peace; we can put our trust in the goodness of God.

Now, where does this faith come from? How do we learn to put our trust in God? Well, I can’t say exactly. But I believe that it begins with letting down our defenses, putting aside our arguments, and inviting God into our lives.

I have a friend who struggled with his faith for many years. He eventually went to seminary and became a pastor. And I remember something from a sermon he once preached...

He said this, “I spent 20 years trying to come to terms with my doubts. Then one day, it dawned on me to try to come to terms with my faith. Now I have gone from the agony of questions I can’t answer, to the agony of answers I cannot escape. For what I now realize it that I am not my own: I belong to God. And for the first time in my life, I am content.”

Dear friends, my hope is that this insight will dawn on you and on me as well. In the “mid-winter of our discontent,” may you and I discover the bright summer sunshine of God’s presence in our lives.

May you and I embrace the claim that God makes upon our lives – so that we, like Paul, choose to live our lives in response to God’s call.

And then, perhaps, we, too, can say that “In any and all circumstances I am content, through the One who strengthens me.”

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.