

Sermon Manuscript: Philippians 4:4-7

Always Rejoice in the Lord

3rd Sunday of Advent – December 12, 2021

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. [NIV]

Do you have the Christmas spirit? Before we ask that question though, we probably need to agree on just what the Christmas spirit is in the first place. I would imagine most of us would be willing to agree that it has something to do with a warm feeling of contentment and joy. But how can we have joy in the face of all of life's troubles? How can we know joy at when a man in Waukesha runs over people at a Christmas parade or when there is one more school shooting in Michigan? Closer to home, the Onalaska Middle School was shut down because of a threat of violence this past week. How can we have the Christmas spirit when the world and maybe even our lives are filled with such trouble and pain? In our text for today Paul tells us how we can have the Christmas spirit of joy and not just at Christmas. He goes so far as to tell us to be filled with that kind of spirit all the time! He tells us that we can **ALWAYS REJOICE IN THE LORD**. We have this joy when we live with gentle confidence, when we pray in all-inclusive trust and when we are guarded with the peace of Christ.

1. Live with Gentle Confidence

A big part of the weeks leading up to Christmas is a sense of anticipation. We can't wait to get the decorations out and the tree up. We plan our activities and prepare our meals. We look forward to singing all our favorite Christmas songs and we busily shop for those special gifts. For us as Christians, all of these things reflect the anticipation of the greatest gift that God gave. We look forward to celebrating once again the birth of Jesus as our Savior. He is the promised Messiah that was long awaited by the People of Israel. And with the coming of his birth, God's long-time promise is now fulfilled. That Savior was born into the world. And for us now we not only anticipate the celebration of Jesus' birth but also look forward to his coming again to bring all his work in the world to its final completion. We are filled with joy because we know Christ will come again.

But the anticipation of our celebration of Christmas can be short lived. We get all geared up for the holiday but then the day arrives and the gifts are opened. The food is eaten and our friends and family go home. It's all over seemingly too soon. It's like a beautiful balloon that suddenly bursts and is no more. This is the nature of the celebration the world knows. But for us as Christians, we can keep our joy because we know Jesus came

and we know that he will come again one day. So we can live every day in anticipation of Jesus coming again.

While we wait, we live with a gentle confidence. We see this in the words of Paul before us today. Paul was filled with this joyous anticipation even though he wrote to the Philippians from prison. He's filled with joy that we see in his own attitude. We see it in the verses immediately preceding our lesson as he pleads for peace between two women in Philippi, Eudoia and Syntyche. In this entire letter to the Philippians Paul radiates joy that leads to this gentle confidence.

Paul's point is this. Because we believe in Jesus as our Savior and because we eagerly know that he will return one day, we can afford to live with this gentleness. The word Paul uses here is one that is hard to express with just one English word. It includes the ideas of gentleness, confidence, willingness, humility and willing submission. It's the attitude that a person would have who already has all he needs. He doesn't feel the need to assert his pride or importance. She isn't worried about her "rights" but instead is most interested in what will help others. He puts others first. C.S. Lewis describes the person who has this quality: *Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.* [**Mere Christianity, p. 128**] It is an attitude that says there is nothing that can happen in this life that could possibly be a real loss. It deals with trouble in endurance. It loves others with loving patience.

Where does this kind of gentle confidence come from? It comes from Christ and the faith we have in him. Paul tells us, *"Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near."* [**verse 4**] Jesus is coming and he has already humbled all his enemies that also stood against us. Sin, death and Satan no longer need to trouble us. Because we look for the imminent return of Christ and know that we are fully forgiven through his work for us, we really don't have time for a lot of things. We don't have time to be afraid or grumble over our sufferings. We don't have time to be hateful and contentious with others. We don't have time to let our pride get in the way of love for one another. We don't have time to envy the gifts others have or to be greedy for things we know won't last. And so since we don't really have time for all of these things while we are busily waiting for our Savior to come, we see that there is nothing left except to "always rejoice in the Lord."

2. Pray with All-Inclusive Trust

Our joy doesn't stop with just gentle confidence. Paul goes on to tell us that we don't have to be anxious or fearful about anything because we can take everything to Jesus in prayer. *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* [**verse 6**] The opposite of joy is anxiety. We

can't be happy when we are worried about anything. But what we often fail to remember is that we have been given the answer for freedom from anxiety. Our sinful weakness always wants to forget that God is still in control. Our sinful pride wants to forget that God has invited us to bring all our troubles to him in prayer. Our weak faith doesn't let us believe that God will answer all our prayers because Jesus speaks in our behalf as our Savior. Through Christ God has given us the key to freedom from anxiety and fear. This freedom is only a prayer away.

For this reason we have no need to be anxious. Paul emphasizes here that nothing is to be excluded from our prayers. There are no limitations on what we can ask. God knows our very hearts. He knows the weaknesses and the hurts. He knows our pains and needs. Christ reminds us that we are purified from sin and washed whiter than snow. Jesus hears everything. Anything that might cause us anxiety can be brought to him. Everything can be brought to God by prayer and petition. It doesn't need to be in fancy language. It doesn't necessarily need to be in language at all. It can be like Paul said to the Romans: The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. [Romans 8:26] And don't forget thanksgiving! God has already given us so much. From our lives and all our physical needs to righteous in Jesus that has given us eternal life, we can never offer thanks enough.

The trouble is that we limit prayer. Don't we set a limit when we ask for only little things like good weather or financial things? Don't we limit prayer when we pull it out like a weapon of last resort against the attacks of really big problems such as when death looms? We say, "All we can do is pray," as if that's the last meager, pitiful, hopeless thing we can do instead of the powerful first weapon to wield. Prayer is meant to be wide ranging. It goes everywhere and is meant to ask for anything. It is the answer to all anxiety. And Christ comes every time we prayer, even if we don't always know it. Since there is nothing to worry about that we can't pray about, we can "always rejoice in the Lord."

3. Guarded with the Peace of Christ

God's gift of prayer is the result of an even greater gift. It is THE Christmas gift. It's the gift that the angels announced to the shepherds: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*" [Luke 2:14] Jesus was born and so came into the world to give us peace with God. This is the reason we are filled with joy not just at Christmas time but all the time as Christians. Peace is something that everyone is really looking for. Peace is the opposite of upset and turmoil. It is the opposite of fighting and hostility. The peace that Jesus brings is more than just a lack of fighting between people. This peace is the contentment and rest that comes to the heart when all things are as they should be. It is the peace that existed in the Garden of Eden before sin entered the world. It is the peace of God "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" spending time

with the creatures he loves. It is a peace that the world cannot offer. It is peace that can only come if God brings it. And that is exactly what Jesus brought when he, true God who took on true humanity, came to live and die and rise again among us. He has brought it by humbling and overcoming all our spiritual enemies for us so we can know his peace. This is the peace of God Paul is talking about here. It transcends all understanding because it is not comprehended or able to be discovered by the world. It is something the world wouldn't offer. It is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit through faith in the witness of God's Word. As Paul says: *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.* [Romans 10:17] But it has been given to us by God's grace alone in Christ. We have peace with God where sin made us God's enemies.

God now is our most close ally and friend. Jesus gives us a peace with God that guards all of our lives. Paul reminds us of the true source of complete and lasting peace. It is God who loves us in Jesus Christ. He says in Romans: *Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.* [Romans 5:1-5]

Are our lives in turmoil? Why is this so? It isn't because we don't have access to peace. It isn't because God doesn't love us. It's because sinful nature wants us to rely on ourselves to deal with trouble. It's because the world distracts us with thinking there are so many other things that could make us happy that we don't have. It's because the devil lies to us and makes us think that God doesn't really love us. That's when we need to hear what Paul tells us today. Christ has humbled all this enemies that would rob us of peace. *"The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, WILL guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."* [verse 7] God comes to us in his Word today to give us understanding into his peace. We have true peace through Christ.

This true peace in Christ will guard us. We are guarded from all that would steal our peace because all is right and at rest with God through Jesus. Since we have peace with God, we also can live in peace with one another. This takes us back to gentle confidence. The only way to find true peace is through Jesus – who he is and what he has done for us. With this peace in our lives also comes joy. It is joy we can live in every day and always!

This Christmas we will be singing "Joy to the World," but this joy is not just for Christmas. The words of this hymn are for the entire year. Because Christ was born, died and rose again, and because he will come again, we can "always rejoice in the Lord." Amen.