

*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*⁵ *Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*⁶ *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*⁷ *And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 4:4-7)*

Rejoice!

One day last week, my youngest son announced, “Only nine days until Christmas vacation!” Notice, he wasn’t counting down to Christmas. He wasn’t thinking about presents. He was counting down to getting out of school. He can’t wait. It kind of makes me wonder what Mrs. Murphy is doing to the 3rd and 4th graders, but I’m going to assume this is just normal nine-year-old enthusiasm for a break from school. This morning, St. Paul says to us, “**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!**” There are many reasons to rejoice: vacations, new jobs, weddings, children being born. All those reasons to rejoice – even breaks from school – are gifts that God gives us. But when Paul tells us twice this morning to rejoice, he is looking beyond the everyday gifts God gives us. He is thinking of something far greater. So this morning, I say to you, **rejoice!**

I. Rejoice because the Lord is near!

II. Rejoice because the peace of God guards your hearts and minds

I.

God calls us to rejoice in every situation, in every circumstance and time of our lives. How can we do that? We rejoice *in the Lord*. St. Paul is not telling to pretend to be happy when we’re not. He’s not telling us that a Christian is never sad or hurt. Rather, Paul is talking about having a reason to rejoice even when all the world seems to be stacked up against us. We rejoice in the Lord, because his promises and his love never change, no matter how hard my life gets.

Paul tells us to rejoice because the Lord is near. Certainly in Advent, that takes on a special meaning. This time next week, the children of our congregation will be telling us the story of Jesus’ birth. Of course, when Paul wrote Philippians, that birth had already happened. The church was not waiting for Jesus to come the first time, but the second. Yet, while they waited, they knew that the Lord was near. He was near in that he said that he’s coming soon. But he was also near in the sense that he was with them. He was concerned with their lives and faith. The Lord is near to you and me as well. He is coming soon. And he cares what happens to us. That is the source of joy in our lives.

We all need a source for joy in our lives because there are lots of things out there that bring us down and hurt us. Conflict hurts us. Family is supposed to be the one place where you’re always accepted, and yet, in almost every family, some issues cause anger and hurt. Every conflict in our families and our churches and our work takes an emotional toll. Illness undercuts our joy. I spend a lot of time visiting our members in the hospital and let me tell you, when you’re in pain, it’s easy to sink into depression. Hour after hour of pain wears you down. Financial difficulties cause real distress – and they often lead to conflicts in our families. The worry keeps us up at night and the lack of sleep drags our hearts deeper and deeper down.

God does not want us to pretend like those things don’t hurt. God doesn’t want us to lie to ourselves or to others. But even in our sorrow, God does want us to rejoice always because the Lord is near. Jesus came that first time in Bethlehem to conquer all the hurts and sorrows of life. He did that by living our hurts and sorrows. That’s why he wasn’t born in a palace. He wasn’t a rich man’s son who never had a hard day in his life. Jesus’ father was a carpenter, a working man. He grew up in a fishing village and he chose a life with very few comforts. He wandered from place to place preaching and teaching. All he owned he carried on his back. And he chose a life that shared in the sorrows of people around him. He healed the sick and encouraged the hurting.

Jesus chose a life that experienced all that sin does to us. All pain and sorrow come from sin. Jesus experienced injustice in the Roman legal system and pain and suffering in that horrible execution on the cross. He experienced rejection. He experienced hell itself when his Father abandoned him on the cross. He experienced death. He did all that to set us free. When he rose, he promised that he will set us free from all the hurt and sorrow that comes from living in a broken and sinful world. He will set us free from the just desserts

of our own sin: from hell and death, which are God's punishment for our sins. He will even free us from the consequences in this life that come from our sinful choices and actions and attitudes.

How will he set us free? The Lord is near. When he returns, he will put an end to sin and suffering. He will remake the world into the paradise that God always intended that it to be. He will free our hearts from sin and never again will we hurt ourselves or others. We will rejoice with him forever. Until that day comes, the Lord is near to us in his word. He comes to us in the gospel, in communion, in baptism and his promise of love and forgiveness, his promise of life to come burrows into our hearts and gives us joy even when we hurt. He makes us glad that we don't walk this road alone, glad that there is an end to all this pain and misery, glad that Jesus will never leave us or forsake and he will get us through it all. My friends, **rejoice because the Lord is near!**

II.

God calls us to do something totally unexpected, even unnatural. When Adam and Eve sinned, they introduced all those things that make life hard. What's our natural response to those things? Fear. Anxiety. If you have to go in for surgery, it's natural to be anxious. Conflict causes our stomachs to churn. We can't keep financial worries or worries about our children, from running through our heads. That's the normal way we sinners are.

But Paul tells us, **"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."** Paul advises us to pray about all that stuff that causes all us anxiety and fear. Now why would that help? Is it just having someone to listen to us? Lots of people think of it that way. In fact, they've done studies and found that people who pray regularly tend to recover faster from surgery. The medical establishment figures it's because their praying is like free therapy. You get to sit on the coach in God's office and unload all your anxieties while he says, "Uh-huh" and makes notes on a pad of paper. That unburdening makes you feel better.

Is that what Paul is talking about? Not at all. Of course, talking to someone does make us feel better and that does include God. But Paul is talking about the power of God. The Bible teaches us that prayer is powerful and effective because the one we're praying to is the one person in the universe with the power to solve our problems. Going to God in prayer reduces our anxiety because we leave those issues in God's hands. God promises that he will deal with them all and we can walk away knowing they are in the best hands possible.

How do we know that? Because we're leaving it in the hands of our Savior. God the Father sent his Son to die for you. Jesus came down here and shared our lives and our humanity so that he could come again and remake this world for us. The Holy Spirit works in the gospel to ease our hearts. All that makes real, Christian prayer a key part of the pursuit of peace. Paul says, **"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** Pastors often close their sermons by saying, "May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." The way we usually hear it, it's a prayer. But the way Paul said it, it's a promise. God will do this. When you lean on the one who sent his Son, when you cling to the Son who lived and died and rose for you, when you depend on the Spirit who works miracles through the means of grace, God is going to do a miracle in your heart. He is going to give you peace that transcends all human understanding.

Peace means the end of war. There is war in our own hearts: the war that anxiety wages on us. The war that the devil wages on our faith. The only answer to that war is the peace God gives. God's peace is a miracle. It transcends all understanding because it's not something we can manufacture. Therapists and doctors try to give peace and they have some success. But God's peace is a miracle only he can give. It conquers all fear and anxiety. With God's peace, Christians have marched boldly to pain and death. With God's peace, Christians have lost everything and not despaired. With God's peace, Christians still face all the anxiety and all the evil that exists in this world and they rejoice because Jesus is their Savior.

That peace is a miracle that we get through the gospel. God comes when we proclaim Jesus and he works in your heart to give that peace. Do you feel it? If your answer is no, why not? It's very simple: because our hearts are not yet perfect in their trust. We're sinners still. The weaknesses and the flaws in our trust lead to weaknesses and flaws in our peace. When we pray and walk away not really expecting God to do anything, we don't feel any better. When we think that we have to solve all our problems and we know that we can't, but we fail to place them in God's hands and to trust that he loves us enough to deal with them, we experience

anxiety and frustration. We have no peace or very limited peace because we have limited and weak faith. That's our own fault because we're sinners.

And we can never change that. But God can. And he does. Jesus loves you. He died for you – he even died to pay for the weakness and flaws in your trust. He rose for you. He wiped away all record of your sin and failure to trust. The Lord comes to us in that promise and he does a miracle: he gives us peace without removing us from this sinful world. Even when you have to go through the hardships that infect this world, he works in the gospel that you hear. He will never leave you or forsake you. That is the source of peace and joy.

The peace of God guards our hearts and our minds. Sin attacks what we're thinking. I experience this quite often in catechism class when I try to explain one God in three persons, or Jesus being both God and man, or eternity. Our sinful minds rebel at these mysteries. Our sinful minds often come up with excuses for sin and even arguments for why sinning is a good idea. Our sinful minds replay wrongs we've suffered and plan the revenge we think we deserve. Sin attacks our hearts, too. All those feelings of hurt and anxiety feed our bruised ego and drive us away from God. All those feelings of lust and desire – think how many commercials have no other purpose but to make us discontent with what we have and make us want something better, whether it's a new phone or new spouse – all those desires wage war against our faith.

But the peace of Christ guards our hearts and our minds. God made us new when he gave us faith. And the new man inside us wages war against that discontent that our hearts want and against those arguments that our minds conceive of. The peace of God reminds our minds that our Lord died and rose for us. All he says is true, even when we don't understand it. The peace of God teaches our hearts to trust that the one who loved us that much still loves us. The peace of God holds the devil at bay. **Rejoice because the peace of God guards your heart and mind.**

We have that peace of God because we have the gospel message. That peace leads us to rejoice. Not to paint smiles on our faces when our hearts are really breaking, but to be glad that we have a God who knows us and loves and who is coming to deliver us from all that heartbreak of this world. While that joy does not erase pain, it does live with pain. It does comfort our hearts and give us real hope when life hurts. My friends, we've entered the holiday season. This upcoming holiday is about so much more than shopping and family get-togethers. For retailers, Christmas is a make or break season. For us, it's more. We are approaching the season of joy, the season that celebrates God's love in coming to us to free us from all that hurts us here. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice! Amen.