

## Advent of Peace

### Philippians 4:4-7 (NIV)

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

Rejoice! ... Why aren't you rejoicing? I'll say it again: rejoice! ... Why are you still not rejoicing yet?

"Well, pastor, you caught me off guard. I don't know what kind of rejoicing you want me to do. Maybe I am rejoicing on the inside..." But more realistically, I expect at least some of you to be thinking: "Honestly, pastor, I just don't feel like rejoicing."

Maybe we don't feel like rejoicing because life isn't all that joy filled right now. My family – they got problems. We argue. We fight. The kids have gone their different ways. I hardly ever see them or talk to them anymore. I'm wrestling with some bad health issues – new pains that weren't there before, old pains that have gotten worse. Got some news from my doctor the other day that I didn't want to hear, news that I'm a little bit in denial about. I thought I was in good health, but I guess not. One of my dear loved ones died this past week. Things aren't going well at work. I feel like I'm hanging by a thread. I don't sleep well. I'm stressed. I'm anxious. So, yeah, I'm not rejoicing right now.

You have all that going on in your mind and you hear Paul's words read to you saying, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (verse 4) If Paul were standing up here today with that big, joyful smile and that exuberant voice, would you just kind of cross your arms and glare back at him thinking, "If only you knew, buddy"? And when he says, "Do not be anxious about anything," we would just roll our eyes and shake our heads because he doesn't get it. We don't want to rejoice. We're anxious. We got problems! Do you have a clue, Paul?

Well, let's think about what Paul had going on in his life. He's writing this letter to the Christians in a city named Philippi. This is a congregation that Paul started. In fact, the first time he was there, he was imprisoned for casting out a demon from a fortune telling girl. The owners of the girl started a mob revolt against Paul and his missionary companion Silas. They were severely flogged and thrown into prison...for driving out a demon! Now, a few years later, Paul is in prison, in chains, again for serving God. On top of that, in the two verses immediately before him writing, "Rejoice!" he was pleading with two women of the congregation, Euodia and Syntyche, to be of the same mind. They were in such a public dispute that the congregation was not only aware of it, but it was hurting their Gospel ministry. When Paul says, "Rejoice," he's saying it while having his own problems too, when things aren't so joyful in his life.

So, Paul, should we just fake a smile and pretend like we are all okay? No. Paul's not encouraging us to take the bad advice of being happy by pretending to be happy. Yet, that is what many have encouraged us to do. And we live it. We fake it. Even this morning, how many times were you asked, "How's it going?" and you answered, "Good" knowing full well that it's not?

Let's stop for a minute and simply acknowledge that our lives, the things around us, are not always good or joyful. Maybe with Thanksgiving being over and the frenzy of Black Friday just having happened the stress of the Christmas season is already getting to you. Maybe the good ol' days are long gone and you desperately wish that they were back, that it was a simpler time, a better time. Maybe it's just that six months ago or a year ago things were going so much better for you.

It's easy to get lost and dragged down in all the miserableness around us, in us. We know when we gripe, it's like eating potato chips: you can't stop at just one. You recall the immediate thing going wrong which then leads to ranting about the other things going wrong. It all just stacks up, and the joy is drained from your life. Even when someone says something that you know is true and you know that they said it so that you would have some joy and cheer you up, you don't rejoice.

Paul's words are not meant for you to fake being filled with joy. No, his point is to tell us that even when outward circumstances are horrible, when people are publicly disputing and not getting along and hurting getting the message of Christ to others, when the family isn't getting along, when you are down in the dumps about your mounting health issues, when death has touched you again, when you feel shackled and bound, imprisoned by life circumstances, you have a joy that no one and no outside circumstances can take away from you.

Paul wrote, “The Lord is near.” (verse 5b) You might hear that and get a bit more anxious. He’s near? Well, that means that the end is near, his return, his judgment. I want more time. I don’t know when he’ll will come, or exactly how. I don’t like not knowing. Will he really take me to heaven? Will he really say that I am not guilty of my sins? I’ve done so much wrong. I’ve wasted so much time. I can’t get over all these other things going on with me.

Maybe you need to hear that phrase again and look at it from a different angle: “The Lord is near.” (verse 5b) This means that he’s close to you. This means that he has not abandoned you. This means that he is near you to help you, to get you through. Remember what he said the first time he came. After he lived for you, he died for you, he rose from the dead for you, he said that he would be with us always to the very end of the age. The Immanuel, the God with us, is near – near you.

No matter what else is going on in and around your life, the Lord is near you. Nothing changes what he has already accomplished for you. He has still paid for all of your sins. He has still taken the punishment of your sins on himself. He has still clothed you with his perfection and his righteousness through your baptism. He has still promised to be with you always. He is still going to come and take you to be with him in heaven. None of the miserable things going on in our lives change these facts.

This is “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding.” (verse 7a) It is the peace that “will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (verse 7b) It is a peace that is not determined by the things going on in your life, but a peace which comes from God who is your life. God is constant, unmovable, unshakable, reliable. If he tells you today to not be afraid because he’s near you, then he is near you and there is no reason to be afraid, no matter the circumstances. As he reminded the congregation and Euodia and Syntyche, so God reminds us that our names are written in his book of life.

But I’m still worried about so many things. I can’t get rid of this stuff because it’s still there. I know God is there for me, that he is near me, but I’m still anxious.

Maybe it’s because Paul himself had the same worried, anxious thoughts that he suggests a solution, a redirection of our worrisome and anxious thoughts. He wrote, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” (verse 6)

The guidance for our lives is so simple yet so powerful. Anything and everything that makes you anxious, that makes you worried, present it to God with prayers and petitions. Ask God to deal with it for you since you already know that he is near you, ready and waiting to answer your prayers. God, I don’t know what is happening with my health. Fix it. Make it better. If not, then give me the patience and strength and understanding to carry on and learn to trust that you have my health in your hands, that you will do what is best for me. Lord, there are fights within my family. Bring us peace. Bring us together. Forgive me for my pride or my harsh words or my mindsets that get in the way of family bliss. With every situation, everything that tries to take your joy away, as soon as it’s on your mind, stop and bring it to the Lord in prayer. He’s near you, ready to take on that request. And he’s always going to do so much more than we could ever do.

And that’s not all Paul says to do. He wrote also to present these requests to God “with thanksgiving.” We just celebrated Thanksgiving again this past Thursday. I don’t know if you have one of those traditions of everyone going around the table and thanking God for something, but it’s always a good exercise of your faith to give thanks to God. Give thanks for every little thing that is good, every little thing that brings you happiness. And don’t forget the big things that bring you joy as well. Give thanks for the constant things, for God and his promises made to you. Give thanks for the people that God has placed in your life, people who love you, people who care for you, people that you get to love and serve – just like how Paul still gave thanks for the two women: Euodia and Syntyche. Write down what you give thanks for instead of just thinking them up on the spot. Honestly, this forces you to remember that you are blessed in so many more ways than the things that make you miserable. As you give thanks for all these things while you make your requests, you will recall the peace that God has given you.

You may not have felt like rejoicing when the sermon first started. But as you put all your requests in God’s hand, as you give thanks to him for his constant presence and blessings, his peace, which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, the one who has come and taken away your sins, the one who will return to take you to heaven. This is the advent of our peace. Come, Lord Jesus, with your peace for us. Amen.