

Rejoice Always

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and God will do this.

Though we have lost this dimension of it, Advent has been observed over the centuries as a season of penitence and self-examination in the church, of being aware of our great need for God as we face our sins as persons and as a human family. It is a season of repentance—awareness of our need for change, but also our desire to change, to open ourselves up to the new life God offers. So there is a time to be on our knees, as it were, conscious of our failures, sins, and shortcomings. But then another word comes to us, as Isaiah put it: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you (Isa. 60:1).” Today is the third Sunday of Advent, when we light the rose colored candle of JOY. It is a turning point, from repentance to joy, from anticipation and longing to hearing the announcement of good news, the word that God is already at work reversing the situations of human suffering and need, including our own. We are called to get up off our knees, as it were, and greet a new day.

Right when we are most aware of our sins, close to despair about ourselves, just when the conditions of our society and world fill us with great discouragement, right in the very midst of the personal struggles we may have in mind, body or spirit...here comes this call to joy. The servant in Isaiah is anointed to announce good news in the midst of all the bad news and expresses joy in God’s salvation. Paul wrote in his letter to the Thessalonians, “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

How is this possible? How can we be joyful when we don’t “feel” like it? It is possible because this kind of happiness, this kind of joy is not a matter of emotions. It is something more, something deeper. It has to do with the heart, the spirit, the core of our being that is not subject to the rise and fall of our emotions, or to the roller coaster ride of our thoughts that soar into positive heights one moment and plunge into negativity the next. It has to do with the capacity we have in that deep place within us to respond to something greater than ourselves or our limited vision. A word comes from outside of us to announce what God is already doing, even

though we may not yet see it. Advent is a time to open ourselves up to this “word.” It is God’s “word.” Not what the t.v. evangelist means when he holds the Bible aloft and says, “This is God’s word.” Scripture points beyond itself to the living word of God [in Hebrew, God’s *dabar*]. It is the energy, the power, the presence of God that calls new life into being. It is the word that comes through the spoken words of the prophets as they denounce oppression, violence, and greed in social and political life. It is also the prophet’s word that brings comfort and hope, that calls our attention to God’s new day, a time of healing, liberation, and peace. It is God’s living word that is still speaking to us in our own day and time, in our own situations as persons and a society and a world. It is a word that wants to awaken in us an awareness of God and where and how God is present in the world, as the very power of life that undermines injustice and oppression and suffering. And that word calls us to be where God is, bringing comfort and healing, justice and compassion. On this Sunday, which is the mid-point of Advent, we hear this word that comes from beyond ourselves and our conditions, a word that can arouse in us “the joy of God’s salvation.” Good news is announced to the poor, freedom to the imprisoned, comfort for those who were grieving, healing for those whose hearts were broken. God is reversing the status quo.

The servant of God calls us to a wider, deeper awareness of where God is at work and what God is doing. A new situation is being created, a shifting of the balance. It is like the story of creation, when God speaks and the creation springs forth into being. Now the word of salvation, of healing, of restoration is spoken, and it is already happening. We are able to see the darkness, through the lens of faith, as the prelude to dawn, not the falling of night. Like the prophet, we can respond in boundless joy at this word that has lifted the veil of suffering to reveal God’s deepest purposes and work already begun. This word is not only a call to rejoice at what God is doing to reverse the destructive and oppressive order of things, but also a call to join in that work, that new life.

Paul writes of a kind of joy that is deep and constant. Rejoice always! It is not the sort of happiness that depends on how things are going for us at any particular moment. For Paul, rejoicing always, praying constantly, and giving thanks in all circumstances seem to be one connected thought. He is talking about the inner life of the person and community of faith.

At first, this call to joy may seem like a Pollyanna view of life. We try to be serious people of faith, serious about the needs of the world, about confronting the powers and principalities that subject people to suffering, serious about the realities of evil, suffering, and so forth. And so we should be. Yet, as people of faith, we are called to go further and deeper, to joy. I don’t think we trust this joy business. It sounds like avoidance, or denial, or seeing the world through rose-colored glasses. So we deny ourselves what for Isaiah and Paul and Jesus himself was at the

core of the life of faith. It is joy in response to God's reality, presence, and power working for the transformation of life. As Paul put it at the end of our reading for this morning, the will of God in Christ for us is to rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks at all times. It is joy that springs from this word: "The one who calls you is faithful, and God will do this." It is a call to believe a word that comes to us from beyond our fears, our hurts, our struggles, our despondencies, a word that speaks to our hearts the good news of God's ultimate power and triumph over all the things that demean and destroy life.

Joy is not luxury that only those who are comfortable and privileged can afford. Joy is at the heart of our faith. It is a sign that we have touched the reality of God's power, promise, and presence. The most joyful people I have known are those who have experienced tremendous suffering, without becoming bitter or angry. They seemed to have touched the very heart of life and experienced a joy that embraces and transcends all the struggles of life. Persons losing everything as they approached their deaths, who may have been quite fearful or angry persons throughout their lives, but encountered something deeper as they made this final journey. Persons like Archbishop Desmond Tutu who some years ago addressed the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). He had been through the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the request of Nelson Mandela, had been through and seen all of that struggle and suffering, and yet who, after he spoke that night, danced down the steps of the platform in that assembly hall, singing, clapping, and teaching us the song "Siyahamba"--"We are walking in the light of God." A woman forty years of age in Lexington, Kentucky, whose husband was in jail, who lived in poverty with her young child, who a few of us in our church there got to know when we volunteered to weatherize houses. Her poverty and struggles were inexcusable in a city and nation of excessive wealth. She died of a stroke before we could get the work done on her house. And yet she had this authentic and infectious joy that greeted us each time we entered her house.

The morning after Thanksgiving Day, I sat at the kitchen table with my mother-in-law in her house in Kentucky. A week before she had learned that she has a tumor that is aggressive and about which nothing can now be done. Kaye had told me that her mother wanted to talk with me about her funeral service. So that morning I sat down with Mildred and we talked. I asked her about favorite scripture readings. Her ability to recall things was shaky that morning and the only one she could name was Psalm 23. I read to her from some other passages that are often read at funerals and memorial services. Paul's words about nothing in all creation being able to separate us from God's love in Christ. Jesus' words to his disciples as he was leaving them—Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I give you a peace that the world cannot give you. Don't let your hearts be trouble, and don't let them be afraid.

When we sat down at the table that morning, I wondered what in the world to say or how to say it. The reality of Mildred's situation brought with it a certain speechlessness. But as I read those words, they put us in touch with a wider and deeper reality. Hearing those words, both of us, I think, were able to touch the joy Paul was talking about—rejoice always!

Last Wednesday night at our School for Christian Living class, as we discussed this reading from Paul's Letter to the Thessalonians, the idea came up that maybe we need a "discipline of joy." Paul says that rejoicing always, praying constantly, and giving thanks in all circumstances is the will of God for us in Christ. It is a command, if you will. Joy is directly connected to God's reality and power. I think God wills joy, prayer, and thankfulness for us because God knows that is what we most need in order to live the kinds of lives we are created to live and Christ calls us to live. So it is not strange to say that we need to practice the discipline of joy. Daily times of quieting ourselves, letting go of our racing thoughts and roller coaster feelings, times of being still, as the psalmist says, and knowing that God is God. We cultivate our spirits to be receptive to the joy that comes from awareness that underneath all the changes of life, in the midst of the most discouraging situations, beyond the valleys of struggle, doubt, or suffering that we have to walk through, there is a peace that is at the heart of life, a steadfast love that holds everything together. If we are working daily with our inward journey, we are preparing our spirits to touch this joy that does not waver. It is the joy that comes to us when we hear that word that comes to us from beyond our struggles and sufferings and despondencies. We can rejoice always, even when we don't feel like it, because the One who calls us is faithful. God will do what God has promised. We can believe it.