

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon For Advent 3 – December 14th, 2014

Philippians 4:4-7

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.

In the name of Christ Jesus, dear friends:

I don't know if you can tell or not, but this is the season to be joyful. After all, it's hard not to, right? You can't watch TV without feeling the joy just oozing out of the television. All of the Christmas ads and commercials just put you in a joyful mood. I mean, how can one not be joyful when finding out that Christmas costs less at Walmart!? The radio has been playing its non-stop Christmas music, the TV stations have been showing all the old Christmas favorites, and even our homes are decorated with all the holiday glitz and shimmering lights. Joy, joy, joy—we're just bombarded with it this time of year.

What's that? It hasn't hit you? You're not feeling the joy? What's wrong with you? How can you miss it? Are you a Scrooge? Didn't you know that whether you're celebrating Christmas, Kwanzaa, Hanukkah, or whatever else it may be, joy is a must? Once December hits if you're not joyfully skipping about everywhere humming and whistling with a smile on your face then something must be wrong with you.

True, while there is much to get excited about, ironically, it is often during this season of joy that rejoicing is one of the most difficult things to do. How can I rejoice when yet again the Christmas bonus is going to come up short of what I expected? What joy is there in spending Christmas alone . . . again? How can I pretend to be so joyful on the outside when I'm hurting so much on the inside? There's not much room to rejoice when others are going to perceive me as a cheapscape this Christmas simply because I can't afford gifts for everyone to whom I'd like to give them. Where is all this joy I'm supposed to be feeling? Why is this time of year too often anything but joyful?

Then to make matters worse, when I'm not feeling the joy it seems that everyone else is, I go looking for joy in all the wrong places. Try as we might, it won't be found in the perfect gift carefully chosen and lovingly picked out for a loved one. It won't be found in even the most beautifully decorated house. It won't be found in all the pretty red bows and ribbons and Christmas lights strewn about our neighborhoods. Nor will it be found in going overboard in letting loose at the office Christmas party or overindulging in self-destructive habits. Joy is not found in those things.

As much of the world is looking frantically to find this joy that everyone is talking about this Christmas season, we realize that the words of the Apostle Paul remind us that true joy is practically right under our noses – in our hearts by grace through faith. And if true joy is right in our hearts, it is easy to see why the Apostle Paul reminds us that:

Theme: We Have True Joy!

- 1. Rejoice in the Lord always**
- 2. True peace brings true joy**

If there ever was a man who walked this earth who had every reason NOT to be joyful, it was the Apostle Paul. Flogged, repeatedly exposed to death, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, lost in the open sea, in danger from rivers, bandits, locals, Gentiles, false brothers, in the city, out of the city, sleepless nights, starvation, freezing, nakedness (2 Cor. 11); Paul had experienced quite the opposite of joy in his time. Moreover, here he was in jail—again—as he penned this letter to his brothers and sisters in the church at Philippi. Yet the griping and complaining and bitterness and resentment toward God that we might expect to hear is absent. It is instead replaced with the encouragement to *“Rejoice . . . always” (v.4).*

Here's a guy who's had everything possible thrown at him and his response is to rejoice always—a nice thought; very seldom a reality. Amazingly, we, who are much better off than Paul ever was, have a difficult time rejoicing always. If we look at our lives, it is very easy to focus on the bad and the rough patches that are all around. Family members are sick. Health is not what it used to be and truth be told, I can't do half the things I would like to do. Stress is all around and no relief is in site. My boss and fellow employees are overbearing and downright rude. I live pay check to pay check and things seem to be getting worse before they are getting better. With all this piled up in front of us we can see why some, ourselves included, might see that Paul's charge to rejoice always is a near impossibility.

But look again at Paul's encouragement and you'll see exactly how Paul can expect us to rejoice always. Sandwiched right there in the middle are three words without which it's impossible to heed Paul's exhortation. "In the Lord." "***Rejoice in the Lord always***" (v.4). There's no such thing as joy without those three words, "in the Lord." You've probably heard Paul's words applied to this time of year in any number of ways. "Jesus is the reason for the season." "There's no *Christmas* without Christ." Though they may be somewhat trite and overused, there's certainly something to them. The only real source of joy in this world is that which comes from our Savior.

Remember all those hardships that Paul endured in his ministry; the ones that would lead most people to reject their Savior rather than rejoice in him? How do you think Paul is able to look back on all of those things and still encourage us always to be rejoicing in the Lord? It's because he knew that had it not been for the Lord, he wouldn't even be around to reflect on those hardships and the present joy he felt. He knew that the Lord carried him through all those times and built up his faith. Like the popular *Footprints* poem, Paul knew the lack of two sets of footprints in his life during the tough times wasn't because God had left him on his own, but rather because God had carried him on his back.

So far our Advent preparation has emphasized the need for getting ready for Christ; for repenting and acknowledging our unworthiness and our sorry state before God. Sometimes we stop there though. Sometimes we act as if that's all that John the Baptist had in mind as he paved the way for the Savior. But simply admitting we're undeserving sinners is the easy part. I need only to look back as far as the time I got out of bed this morning to compile a hefty list of all my sins against God. It's the second part of repentance—laying hold of our forgiveness—that we often trip up and stumble on. And without that second part, dear friends, it's impossible to rejoice always. It's possible to rejoice only when we shift the emphasis from me and my sorrow over sin to the forgiveness we have "in the Lord."

What's the greatest Christmas gift you've ever received? Let's say that this year on Christmas Day you find yourself down to your last present. This present happens to be small and shaped like an envelope. As you open the gift you see that enclosed is a letter addressed personally to you. You start reading that letter and it goes something like this: "Dear child, I didn't spend a dime on your present this year, yet it was priceless. The gift I've given you has enabled me to rewrite your past. This gift has allowed me to replace your every hurtful and hate-filled thought with thoughts of loving kindness. It has allowed me to replace every single unloving action toward others with deeds of gratitude. Your spotty devotional life and shabby church attendance now have perfect marks. Your foul language and course joking have been exchanged for gracious complements and heart-felt encouragement. Do you remember the first, second, third, and so on, time you lied? Stole? Lusted? Abused? Envied? Gossiped? Neither do I. Merry Christmas, Your Loving Heavenly Father." Imagine being able to read a letter like that every night and every morning! You don't have to imagine, because that gift is a reality for the rest of your life. Only in light of such an incomparable gift could we ever rejoice in the Lord always.

Do you feel like you get the point already? "OK, OK, enough—we'll be more joyful. Let's get on with it." Apparently Paul didn't quite feel the point came across in his letter, so he was compelled under divine inspiration to repeat it. "***I will say it again: Rejoice***" (v.4)! In this case Paul didn't put too much stock in the notion that when it comes to joy there can be "too much of a good thing."

Our sinful flesh would disagree. It would try to convince us that when it comes to rejoicing in the Lord we sure can have too much of a good thing. Why do you find there's always that struggle inside of you to go to church or stay home; read your thrilling mystery or open the Bible; study God's Word while you're waiting or flip through the TV channels? The new man in each of us wants nothing but to be more Christ-like and to achieve the perfection God demands while here on earth. The sinful flesh, though, will always be at war with us trying to convince us that this Sunday's going to be the same old message as last Sunday only wrapped up in a little different packaging. It tries to convince us that we already know what the Bible says so we can use our time more effectively doing other things.

So Paul repeats his mantra like a drill sergeant who won't quit until we get it right. Paul knew firsthand the war going on between his sinful flesh and new man. He wants nothing more than for us to rejoice, and so he pushes and prods and encourages and builds up the new man in each of us to spur us on to realize the joy of rejoicing. He wants us to constantly strive to put down the sinful flesh and squash it out completely. And each time our sinful flesh sees us rejoicing in the Lord, it slowly loses its grip on us. Our joy in Christ is the downfall of sin and Satan. Such rejoicing sucks the life and power that sin holds over us, because that rejoicing is founded in the manger, at the cross, and everywhere in between. Christ is the centerpiece of joy.

There are so many things vying for your attention this time of year and claiming to be able to bring you such joy. There are also a number of things that will do nothing but rob you of joy. There's only one place to find true joy this season and year round: in the Lord. You know that. Let your joy in the Lord prevail during the hustle and bustle of these days. Let your joy be evident to all with whom you come into contact. Say it along with Paul, again and again and again if necessary: ***Rejoice in the Lord always!*** Amen.