

The Fourth Sunday in Advent  
Philippians 4:4-7: "Will You Rejoice This Christmas?"  
December 21/22, 2019 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

**In Nomine Iesu**

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O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here;  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
And death's dark shadows put to flight.

O come, Desire of nations, bind  
All peoples in one heart and mind;  
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,  
And be Thyself our King of Peace.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel. *Amen.*  
(*Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, 110, vv. 6 & 7)

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)*

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*The sermon text for today is taken from the fourth chapter of St. Paul's Letter to the Philippians. We hear these words again in Jesus' name:*

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.  
(ESV)

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*These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)*

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In Christ Jesus, our joy, our crown, our Lord (ELH 127, v. 4), dear fellow redeemed:

Do you have a favorite Christmas? Was there one year in particular that ranks on top because of something special that happened or because of some gift you received? Maybe a family member made it home when they weren't expected. Or your parents told you that the gift you wanted was too much, but there it was under the tree.

For some of you, your favorite Christmas may have happened a while ago. You expect that no Christmas in the future could compare to the good ones of your youth. When you think back, there is a certain warmth in those memories that present Christmases do not have. Now you might feel the pressure to deliver that feeling to your kids or grandkids. You have to remember all the little traditions. You have to get the right gifts. You have to prepare the favorite foods. Some people thrive on these preparations, but others feel overwhelmed and stressed.

Still others would rather not have Christmas at all. It reminds them of loss, of a parent that is no longer here, or a spouse, or a friend, or a child. Christmas is supposed to be a warm and happy time, a time for family. But Christmas only makes them feel more alone. Others feel resentment at Christmas, resentment toward those who hurt them, who did not appreciate the sacrifices they made.

In today's Epistle lesson, the Holy Spirit has given us words of encouragement and comfort at times like these. The Spirit inspired Paul to write this letter to the church in Philippi while he was kept in a Roman prison. It wasn't the first time he was imprisoned for preaching the Gospel. In fact, his first visit to Philippi included a night in jail after he was targeted by a mob. On that occasion, Paul and his fellow worker Silas – their feet fastened in stocks – prayed and sang hymns to God late into the night (Act. 16:25).

Their joyful confidence in that setting seemed just as out of place as the words we have today. From his cell in a Roman prison Paul wrote: *"Rejoice in the Lord always!"* In case his readers should quickly pass over or miss what he said, he repeated the message: *"again I will say, Rejoice!"* It doesn't seem like Paul could be joyful at a time like this. But he was, and in his Letter to the Philippians, he recounted the things that brought him this joy.

He said that he always prayed for the Philippian Christians with joy because of their support and encouragement of his work (1:4-5). He rejoiced that his imprisonment served to advance the Gospel among the imperial guard and to embolden others to proclaim God's grace (1:12-18). He rejoiced that God's will would be done whether in Paul's life or his death (1:18-20). And He rejoiced at the Philippian congregation's faithfulness to the Word (2:2,17-18, 4:1).

Paul's joyful attitude was not simply a "glass-half-full" rather than a "glass-half-empty" approach. His focus was not on the power of positive thinking. His joy was *"in the Lord."* He explained this more toward the end of his letter. He wrote: *"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me"* (4:11-13).

When people cite the last part of that passage, *"I can do all things through him who strengthens me,"* their focus is typically more on the *"I can do all things"* than on the *"through him who strengthens."* Athletes cite this passage as they try to up their game. Entrepreneurs cite it while trying to reach their business goals. Students cite it while studying for a big test.

But Paul's focus was always on the teaching and preaching of the Gospel. He did not care about any personal achievements. He did not apply these words to his tent-making. He said, *"I can be brought low, I can be hungry and in need, and yet I will rejoice because I have Jesus."* As he said in another letter: *"when I am weak [weak in himself], then I am strong" [strong in the Lord]* (2Co. 12:10).

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."* It's important to understand that joy is not the same as happiness. You and I can rejoice even when we are not feeling happy.

- As we deal with mistreatment and unkindness from others, we can rejoice that God loves us and gives us fellow believers to encourage us.

- As we struggle with physical and mental pain, we can rejoice that Jesus personally endured such pain and promises to carry us through it.
- As we experience financial trouble, we can rejoice that the things of this world are only temporary, and that Jesus has obtained true riches for us in heaven.
- As we carry the burden of guilt for sins we have committed, we can rejoice that Jesus paid for all these sins on the cross and forgives them all.
- As we mourn the death of someone we love, we can rejoice that Jesus rose in victory over death and will come again to raise the dead on the last day.

Our joy in the Lord is not a feeling we can get better at if we practice it enough. Our joy is produced in us by the Holy Spirit through hearing the Word of Christ. The Holy Spirit leads us to believe that His Word is meant for each one of us. The angel said to the shepherds, *“behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people”* (Luk. 2:10), which means these *“good tidings of great joy”* are meant for you. John the Baptizer said, *“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”* (Joh. 1:29), so the Lamb came to take away your sin.

The Lord wants you to know and believe these things because He loves you. He cares about every aspect of your life. He knows you better than a mother knows her child. He knows you better than you know yourself. He sees you in your pain, your stress, your sadness, and your loneliness, and He comes to help and strengthen you. In his great Advent hymn, Paul Gerhardt spoke about the Lord’s gracious presence with us:

Rejoice, then, ye sad-hearted, / Who sit in deepest gloom,  
 Who mourn o’er joys departed, / And tremble at your doom;  
 Despair not, He is near you, / Yea, standing at the door,  
 Who best can help and cheer you, / And bid you weep no more. (ELH 94, v. 6)

In today’s text, the Apostle Paul wrote that *“The Lord is at hand.”* He is not far away; He is near you. He hears when you cry out to Him. He hears your prayer of repentance. He hears your call for help. This is why there is no need to *“be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”* Your Lord hears every petition you make, and He answers each one in the best way and at the right time.

Through His Word and Sacraments, the Lord is present to give you peace. The peace He brings *“surpasses all understanding.”* It is not the peace of having a day all to yourself, or finally finishing a project that has taken you a long time, or getting your whole family under one roof. The Lord gives a peace which the world cannot give. He brings the peace of sins forgiven, of God’s anger appeased, of salvation won, of eternal life secured.

This peace with God had nothing to do with our goodness, our efforts, or our abilities. This is why it is so beyond our understanding. Why would God send His Son to make peace with sinners? Why would He give so much when we had nothing to give Him? This was a work of pure mercy and grace, and it is why our confidence in our salvation can be so rock-solid. Our salvation does not depend on us; it was secured entirely by Him. So we do have peace with God, and no earthly thing can take that away from us.

This promise of peace with God is what now guards our hearts and our minds. This Gospel message keeps the devil away with all his temptations and lies. It keeps the world from filling our eyes and ears with false hope. And it keeps our sinful nature from destroying our faith. The peace of forgiveness and salvation that we have through Jesus – this is our reason for rejoicing.

So my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow heirs of God, partakers of peace by faith in Jesus: if this Christmas week finds you hurting or afraid or lonely or sad or overwhelmed – you can still rejoice! You can rejoice that Jesus came to save you. You can rejoice that He still comes to strengthen you. And you can rejoice that soon He will come again in His glory. *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!”*

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

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