

December 12, 2021
Third Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Philippians 4:4-7 (Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 7:18-28)

THE PEACE OF GOD WILL GUARD YOUR HEARTS AND MINDS IN CHRIST JESUS.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Our text for meditation today comes from St Paul's letter to the Philippians, the 4th chapter which you heard read earlier.

While Advent is considered a penitential season, on the Third Sunday in Advent we pause in the midst of our repentant sorrow to *rejoice* at our Savior's Advent. We light a rose-colored candle on the Advent wreath, for it symbolizes hope and joy. Our Propers of the day call on us to *rejoice*.

It should be easy to *rejoice*, but sometimes, it is difficult, especially during this time of the year. It is hard to *rejoice* when the devil throws a host of trials and tribulations in your path by which he hopes to steal your hope. In our Lord's rich wisdom, he allows His children to be attacked with sadness and grief, despair, and depression, to draw them closer to Him. For those who have lost loved ones, Advent is the start of the annual dredging up painful memories, missing those who have gone home to be with the Lord. For those with broken relationships, it is difficult to *rejoice* when the intimate connection you had with another is fractured or cut off. And especially this morning, how can one *rejoice* when they have lost house and home, shoes and clothing and all that they had, including loved ones, in a devastating tornado just two weeks before Christmas? Even still, St Paul says:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." (Philippians 4:4)

You and I want to cry out and say: *"Why Paul? Why should I rejoice when my life seems to be spiraling out of control or worse yet, circling the drain?"* St Paul replies, saying:

"Rejoice... The Lord is at hand." (Philippians 4:4-5)

Rejoice was the concluding message which the Lord God sent His prophet Zephaniah to proclaim to His people. Zephaniah first prophesied of the Lord's coming judgment against Judah, Jerusalem, and her enemies – and also – the Lord's final judgment to come on the Last Day. Zephaniah tells of dark, lonely, and deadly days to come. But He also announces God's plan for restoration for all who repent and trust in the Lord's deliverance, saying.

"Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart...!" (Zephaniah 3:14)

The Lord is calling His people to *rejoice* in the face of death, destruction, and deportation for He is at hand. *Rejoice* in His promise and assurance that He will take care of them, restoring their fortunes, bringing them salvation. He declares:

“The King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.” (Zephaniah 3:15)

God kept His promise and like Israel, you have God’s promise. The Lord is in your midst and you need not fear evil. If and when the Lord allows you to be attacked with sadness and grief, despair and depression, He bids you to cry out in prayer and supplication, making your requests known to Him who can do all things. *Rejoice* and give thanks with all your heart, O Baptized child of God. Your King has come for you and continues to be with you. Nothing can separate you from His gracious love. (cf: Romans 8:39)

Similar to Zephaniah, John the Baptist came with a message of judgement and salvation. But in our Gospel text this morning, it seems that he is having a difficult time *rejoicing*. He had been preparing the way for the coming Messiah, proclaiming:

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2)

As we heard last week, John made it clear that judgment awaits all who are unrepentant. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees. All who do not bear fruits of repentance will be cut down and cast into the fire. (cf: Luke 3:9) On the Last Day, Christ Himself, the righteous Judge, is coming with a winnowing fork in his hand and will clear the threshing floor, separating the wheat from the chaff, gathering the wheat (all who bear fruits of repentance) into His eternal kingdom in heaven, but the chaff (all who lack fruits of repentance) He will burn with the unquenchable fires of hell. (cf: Luke 3:17)

That was John’s message to King Herod – and Herod had him thrown into prison for calling out his sin of marrying his brother’s wife. (cf: Matthew 14:3-4) After a year in prison John sends his own disciples to Jesus to ask:

“Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Lk 7:20).

Bible scholars disagree whether John was suffering from depression – or – in his question he’s encouraging his disciples to leave him and follow Jesus. Rather than get bogged down in that argument, focus on Jesus’ response. He says:

“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them” (Luke 7:22).

Jesus pointed to His mighty works of healing and His proclamation of the Good News to the poor as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecies of the Messiah. Jesus’ words and deeds verified that He is the promised Christ. Now, ascended into heaven, Jesus says that He is coming again soon. (cf: Revelation 22:7, 12, 20) He could return at any moment. Now is the time to listen to His voice. Now is the time to take to heart the preaching of John the Baptist and repent. Now is the day of salvation. (2 Corinthians 6:2) Now is the time to take refuge in the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. When He returns, He comes to judge. It will be too late to repent.

In our epistle reading this morning St. Paul shares the same message as John the Baptist:

“The Lord is at hand.” (Philippians 4:5)

Paul is writing to the Christians in Philippi, calling on them to *rejoice* despite their circumstances. Philippi is a Roman colony, an outpost of the decadence and sin of Rome’s pagan culture. Paul warns them of false teachers in their midst (cf: Philippians 1:16). Most of all, he exhorts them to live lives worthy of the Gospel even while living in a pagan community. (cf: Philippians 1:27)

It’s tempting to think that it is easy for Paul to encourage the saints through a letter written from afar. But, remember Paul is writing while suffering in prison. He doesn’t know if he’s going to be set free or put to death for his faith. It would be death some six to eight years later. Through a life of hardship, Paul has learned to be content in whatever situation, in plenty and in want. (cf: Philippians 4:10-13) Whatever your situation, Paul says:

“... rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.” (Philippians 4:4-5)

The word “*reasonableness*” here can also be translated as “*yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, and tolerant.*” (BDAG, 371) This yielding spirit does not insist on righting every wrong, even when being treated unfairly or when everything seems to be lost. Like your Savior, have compassion on others, always be ready to forgive just as God, in Christ, has forgiven you. ***Rejoice, for the Lord is at hand.***

When St Paul says “*rejoice,*” he is not describing a legal requirement but a Gospel statement. The joy of the Christian can’t be forced. You cannot impose joy. You cannot require that anyone truly *rejoice* in anything. To *rejoice* in the Lord is a declaration of what it is that brings the believer joy. You *rejoice* because Christ Jesus has come and defeated sin, death, and the grave on your behalf.

- ***Rejoice!*** He was delivered up for your trespasses and raised for your justification. (cf: Romans 4:25)
- ***Rejoice!*** In the waters of Baptism God adopted you into His holy family and now your citizenship is in heaven. (cf: Philippians 3:20)
- ***Rejoice!*** He comes and dwells among you today in His Word and Sacrament, creating and sustaining your faith, and forgiving all your sins.
- ***Rejoice!*** He promises to be with you to the very end of the age. (cf: Matthew 28:20)
- ***Rejoice!*** The Lord is at hand, coming again soon to take you and all believers to heaven. Even as He lives and reigns today in a human body that has been glorified, at His second coming, He will transform your sick, lowly, dying body into a glorified body that will never suffer pain or death or the effects of sin. (cf: 1 Corinthians 15:42–44; Revelation 21:4)

Regardless of what the devil and the world throw at you, despite how dark your road in this life gets, you can ***“rejoice in the Lord always, for the Lord is at hand.”***

Brothers and sisters in Christ, Holy Scripture bears testimony that Jesus is the One *to* come, sent from God and is your Savior. He’s the One the who *has* come, and *will* come again. He *is in* your midst. ***Do not*** look for another. He’s in your midst binding up your broken hearts,

comforting the mourning, justifying the unrighteous, regenerating the dead in faith to life, and granting eternal life to all who believe.

Jesus did not come making demands on you, adding to your anxiety or heavy load. He came not to *be served* but *to serve* and give His life as a ransom. (cf: Matthew 20:28) God became flesh not to stress you out, but to carry away all of your sadness and sorrow. He came to bear your burdens and lighten your load and to give you rest. (cf: Matthew 11:28-30) Being born of woman, He came to become numbered with sinners, becoming the least in the Kingdom, suffering and dying a criminal's death on the cross in your stead.

Risen from the dead and ascended into heaven He remains in your midst working through His means of grace. He is in your midst in His Word of Absolution, forgiving your sins of doubt and despair. He is in your midst in the preaching of His Word, granting you faith and strengthening you when your road is dark and depressing. He's in your midst – in, with, and under the bread and wine in His Holy Supper, sustaining you in body and soul when you feel strong and when you feel there's no escape. Jesus is in your midst, strengthening you to bear fruits of repentance and live lives worthy of the Gospel.

Rejoice! Christ Jesus came to grant you His peace. Not peace in from earthly turmoil and strife. But true peace, knowing that He has made peace between you and your Heavenly Father through His vicarious work of salvation. When life makes no sense, God's peace sustains you and directs you. True peace resides in Jesus your Lord who is in your midst, who comes to you in Word and Sacrament, who will come again to take to you to Himself in His Kingdom that has no end.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.