

## Rejoice!

### Philippians 4:4-8

We are now at the third Sunday of Advent, that hectic and harried run up to Christmas, and everywhere we are seeing or hearing reminders that this is a time to rejoice: rejoice that you can now get 5% cash back on all purchases made with your favorite credit card, or rejoice that you can now get \$1,500 off the MSRP *and* low finance rates on that new car, or rejoice that the wine and spirits store is running their holiday special, or rejoice that the Savior of the world has come to set us free. What? Wait. You don't hear that last one now? Really?!

Today, the third Sunday in Advent, is often referred to as Gaudete Sunday. Gaudete is Latin for rejoice. I don't know about you folks but rejoice is not a common word in my vocabulary. Happy, satisfied, and content are more likely than rejoice to show up in my speech. So, what does it mean to rejoice?

The folks at Merriam-Webster Dictionary tell us that rejoice is a verb that means to give joy to or to gladden, or to feel joy or great delight. Some synonyms for rejoice are:

*crow, delight, exuberate, exult, glory, joy, jubilate, kvell, triumph*

Do you feel the energy in those words? And if you are unsure about kvell, it is a Yiddish word meaning to be extremely proud. Think of our Scripture

reading last week and how Zechariah was *kvelling* over his newborn son, John. You could certainly feel the positive energy in Zechariah's song.

The letter we read from Paul to the Church at Philippi was written likely while he was in jail in Rome. Hard to imagine that Paul would be feeling much positive energy given his circumstances, yet he still manages to exude joy in his message. He wrote to thank the church for thinking of him in his imprisonment, but also to urge the church toward unity and humility. In the verses just before today's reading, we learn that there are two women in the church who were at odds with one another. It would appear the church at Philippi was lacking in joy due to tensions created by their disagreement. Paul asks that the church as a whole help the women to reconcile. What is his prescription for this reconciliation to happen? To rejoice in the Lord.

Paul is adamant in this instruction as he writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Whenever you hear a phrase repeated, it means we are to pay attention. We don't know what the disagreement between these two women happened to be, but it may have been that they had lost sight of where their hope and joy came from. Sometimes we forget that, too.

As I mentioned earlier, the commercial world tries to tell us that happiness lies in material items, but our joy as Christians is not something that can be bought at the local mall. Although we may experience a temporary rush of excitement over that one special gift at Christmas, that happiness will inevitably wear off. Then we are likely to be seeking after the next rush of

temporary happiness. How often have you heard the lament on Christmas morning, “Is that all I got?!” An attitude of ingratitude leaves little room for rejoicing.

Each year millions of people anticipate that Christmas will somehow make them happy. And why not, aren't we guaranteed that option in the Declaration of Independence where it says we are entitled to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?” Therein lies the rub, happiness is something that must be pursued. It takes our time and energy to achieve.

Martin Luther King, Jr., is quoted as saying, “The end of life is not to be happy. The end of life is not to achieve pleasure and avoid pain. The end of life is to do the will of God, come what may.” C.S. Lewis once said “...We have learned that joy is more than a sense of the comic, more than earthly pleasure, and to a believer even more than what we call happiness. Joy is the enjoyment of God and the good things that come from the hand of God. If our new freedom in Christ is a piece of angel food cake, joy is the frosting. If the Bible gives us the wonderful words of life, joy supplies the music. If the way to heaven turns out to be an arduous steep climb, joy sets up the chair lift.” Both of these men make the point that joy is not the same as happiness, since joy is able to exist even when happiness may not. I don't know too many people who would rejoice in that arduous uphill climb, but with the knowledge that God is always near the climb becomes bearable, even enjoyable.

In the Advent season pitched by Madison Avenue, the pursuit of happiness leaves many much less than joyful. In the rush to find the perfect gifts to give and hosting the perfect holiday dinner, we can find ourselves doing more grouching than rejoicing. As we deal with dreaded “supply chain issues”, rising prices on our favorite holiday goods, and ever changing COVID precautions, we find ourselves trending more toward regretting than rejoicing. Joy allows for patience rather than impatience when things aren’t going the way we want. Trusting that the Lord is present and acting in our best interest allows us to “wait on the Lord.”

While we wait, we can engage in prayer. Prayers of supplication and thanksgiving made before God will avail much. Through our prayers we are active in our waiting. Joy comes from knowing that we are not left to our own striving. The God of all Creation has heard the prayers of all his people through time and has responded, as we are reminded in the Christmas season. He responded by sending his Son Jesus, Immanuel, God with us.

If, after offering prayers of supplication and thanksgiving, anyone still finds themselves with a “Bah, humbug” spirit, Paul has another admonition:

<sup>8</sup>Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Don't let the hustle and bustle of the season bring out the Scrooge in you. Focusing on all the headaches the rush to Christmas can bring only brings more headaches. Focusing on our relationship to God and all that he has done for us, going so far as to send his son to save us from our sin, will bring us closer to true joy. All these good things - truth, nobility, righteousness, purity, loveliness, and admirability, come from God. When we let our hearts and minds seek these things, we are promised joy and peace, a peace that passes all human understanding, through the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

During these final weeks of Advent may the words of Zechariah ring in our ears:

<sup>67</sup> ... Zechariah (when) filled with the Holy Spirit prophesied:

<sup>68</sup> "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,  
because he has come to his people and redeemed them.

<sup>69</sup> He has raised up a horn<sup>[a]</sup> of salvation for us  
in the house of his servant David

And let us respond with Paul saying: "Rejoice in the Lord always." We will say it again: Rejoice!

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