

***The People Walking in Darkness Have Seen a Great Light:
Good News of Great Joy
Philippians 4:4-7***

Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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Last week I was given two short humorous tidbits about Christmas that I want to share with you this morning. The first concerns a young boy who was listening attentively to his Sunday school teacher while she was reading the Christmas story. When the teacher explained about all the crowds that had come to Bethlehem because of the census ordered by Caesar Augustus, and that Joseph and Mary had to stay in the stable because there was no room at the inn, the little boy blurted out, "Well, I blame Joseph for that. He should've made a reservation."

And then there's the one about little Janie on the day before Christmas. Janie was in her room, and she was trying to be good. She was being so quiet that her mother called up to her room and asked what she was doing. "Nothing," replied Janie. "With you and God and Santa Claus watching me all the time, I can't do anything."

Laughter is good for us. Literally, laughter helps release endorphins, which are the body's natural painkillers. But laughter is also good for the soul, because it lifts the spirits and, at least momentarily, gives us relief from stress and anxiety and sadness.

Often you'll hear the words "laughter" and "joy" paired together. And it is often the case that laughter is associated with joy, but not always. In the same way happiness is often associated with joy, but again, not always. Joy is not the same as laughter. Joy is not the same as happiness.

Pointing to the dawning of the age of the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah said, "The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those who live in the valley of the shadow of death, a great light has dawned."¹

Today we lit the third candle on our Advent wreath, the pink candle of joy. Originally Advent was a somber season of penance as Christians prepared for the coming of Christ as judge. During the Middle Ages the appointed epistle lesson for the Third Sunday in Advent was the text from Philippians 4, which begins with the Latin word "Gaudete", meaning "rejoice." "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." Thus the penitential mood for Advent was momentarily replaced with joyous celebration, and a candle was changed from purple to rose-colored to mark the sign of delight in the midst of fasting and repentance. It is a tradition that the Lectionary continues to preserve today by including at least one text every year on the Third Sunday of Advent that contains an injunction to rejoice. Thus this morning's text from Paul's letter to the Philippians: Rejoice in the Lord always. In case you didn't hear me the first time, I'll say it again: Rejoice!

Rejoice always.

It is a message that seems so incongruous against the backdrop of our world: Rejoice always. And yet joy is one of the lights that shines in the darkness.

Rejoice in the Lord always, said Paul. In any circumstance, rejoice. In every circumstance, rejoice. We hear that command, and we're tempted to think that Paul had no idea what he was saying. How can that be possible—Rejoice always?

The truth is, Paul knew exactly what he was saying. And he wasn't offering advice from the comfort of an ivory tower or a fully-furnished mansion. When he wrote his letter to the Philippians, he was in chains in a Roman prison cell, fully aware that he may never leave the place alive. He had been persecuted, beaten, imprisoned several times. He knew that the Christian gospel was a go-against-the-flow message that was rejected and despised by most of those who heard it. Yet as he wrote his epistle, some form of the word for "joy" or "rejoice" is found fourteen times in these four chapters, including the two times in the verse I have quoted today: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!"

And so by his own example Paul helps us understand that joy—the kind of joy we celebrate at Advent—is not dependent upon our circumstances. Joy and happiness are not the same thing. Sometimes joy is accompanied by happiness, but not always. The truth is, we can experience joy at the peak of happiness, or at the abyss of grief and despair. That's why Paul could command us to rejoice at all times, because joy is not dependent upon our circumstances.

One of the difficult things about joy is that it's something so intense, so deeply personal, that joy is something that you have a hard time explaining to someone who hasn't experienced it. I've experienced joy, and I feel like I know joy when I see it. But I'm not sure I can readily explain it, because for each of us joy is deeply personal and unique.

Sometimes I experience joy when I hear the beautiful music from the choir. Sometimes I experience joy when I see the twinkle in someone's eyes. Sometimes I experience joy when I drive over the bridge and look out on the bay enshrouded by fog. Sometimes I experience joy when I get a hug or a note of encouragement during a time when I'm feeling down. Sometimes I experience joy when I see the sunshine reflecting off the snow-capped mountains.

How about you—when do you experience joy?

How do you put your finger on what joy is, that we can experience it in good times as well as bad?

C.S. Lewis described joy as "an unsatisfied desire which itself is more desirable than any other satisfaction." William Willimon said that "Joy, real joy, is always reflexive, a spontaneous yet deep human outburst because something has happened.... It's a gift, a response to something that happens to you." Mother Teresa said that "joy is a net of love by which you can catch souls. A joyful heart is the inevitable result of a heart burning with love." Billy Graham says that joy is a miracle of the Holy Spirit who lives within a person.

How do you describe joy? The bottom line is this: Joy is something that happens when we encounter God's love and grace and compassion. Joy is the experience of the presence of God. Rejoice in the Lord always, says Paul... The Lord is near.

The Lord is near. It is an awareness that God has come to us that enables us to have joy. If our core problem is that we are estranged from God because of our sinfulness, then it is indeed good news of

¹ Isaiah 9:2

great joy to know that the God from whom we have been separated comes to us with grace and love.

Joy is possible in all circumstances because joy springs from the presence of God, and not from the circumstances themselves. And whereas there are some who are wont to run and hide in terror at the thought that God is nearby, for they envision a wrathful God whose goal it is to smite all the godless ones—yet for those who know God through Jesus Christ, we can rejoice in his presence, because we know otherwise; we know God's presence brings compassion, and providential care, and peace into our lives.

The other night we hosted twelve boys from Tara Hall for dinner. These were boys who in some way or another have been told that they aren't good enough. They are boys whose home life has been one struggle after another. But through Tara Hall, and through the many churches in this community that reach out to the boys, these boys experience a God of compassion and unconditional love. And so when we shared dinner and Christmas gifts with these boys, you could see the joy at their table, because God had surrounded them with love and grace.

Their circumstances hadn't changed—they still face difficult family situations. But they have come to know that the Lord is near, and in his nearness the Lord offers comfort and peace and hope and steadfast love. And so they could rejoice. And rejoice they did!

The God who once was far away has come near to us in Jesus Christ. The Lord is near—rejoice in the Lord always.

At Advent we look forward to the return of Christ. But in the meantime we would do well to remember that the One whose coming we await is the same One who told us that already he is with us always, even to the end of the age.

And so we wait. We wait for Christ to come and judge the world and usher in his kingdom. But in the meantime, while we wait, let us rejoice, for the Lord is near.

Amen.