

Phil. 4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

CAN WE LIGHT THE CANDLE OF JOY?

Today we began our service by singing, “Light the candle of joy today.” Do you believe that’s possible? Can we light the candle of joy even when we don’t feel very joyful? Is joy a choice?

Long ago Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians from a jail cell. And Paul had a choice to make. Paul could have chosen to focus upon all that he had lost. Paul could have given in to the fears that were undoubtedly a part of his life at that time. But, he didn’t. Instead he wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always” and “have no anxiety about anything.”

Paul could have complained to God that his imprisonment was unfair. But, instead he wrote, “... with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Paul had every reason to look on the dark side in his situation, but instead he wrote, “...whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Paul had every reason to give up, but instead he wrote: “I press on... I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Apparently Paul believed that lighting the candle of joy was possible. Paul believed that though we cannot control what happens to us we can control how we respond to what happens to us.

Some of the most joyful people I know face many problems. But, they do not allow themselves to be defined by their problems. They light the candle of joy in the darkness. They look beyond the problem to the promise.

Don’t misunderstand. This is more than just the power of positive thinking or looking on the bright side. The people I am talking about are very realistic about their problems and the problems that we face in the world.

But, they have a joy based upon the belief that ultimately God’s power to save is stronger than the forces of evil. They have personally experienced what our passage for today describes as a “peace that passes all understanding.” They have a joy that is not dependent upon circumstances.

In times of great difficulty they are able to cast their burdens upon the Lord and leave them there because they know that God cares for them. (1 Peter 5:7)

They can light the candle of joy because they know that the “Lord is near.” (Philippians 4:5)

JOY AND THE ANTICIPATION OF GOD’S GRACE

Would you like to light the candle of joy in your life today? Would you like to be a joyful person? Would you like to be a person whose happiness is not dependent upon circumstances?

The word translated “rejoice” is related to the Greek word for “grace.” The ability to rejoice is connected to an appreciation of God’s grace, that surprising and precious gift of forgiveness.

We talk a lot about God’s amazing grace in the church, but in my experience we don’t always experience that grace. A fierce critic of the church once said that Christians should “look more redeemed.”

I think he had it right. If we are not joyful, then we have somehow missed the message.

The coming of Jesus is good news. That’s what the word “gospel” means. How did the angels put it to the shepherds? “I bring you good tidings of great joy ...”

Joy is based upon the fact the Lord is near.

I had a professor who used to say that the early church “lived life on tiptoe.” In other words the people in the early church had a sense that the second coming of Christ was right around the corner.

They believed that the coming of the Lord would right the wrongs of this present age and fulfill God’s purposes for the world.

If they lived life on tiptoe, I think that many of us live flatfooted. We do not anticipate the coming of the Lord. We mistakenly believe that today will be just like tomorrow.

But, in Advent, a season of joy and anticipation we remind ourselves that this is not true.

The Lord is near, and this promise is especially precious when things are not going so well. The Psalmist (34:18) wrote, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

I wonder. How would you change your life if you thought the Lord was near?

Would you be afraid? Would you worry that God was coming to judge you?

Or would you be glad to know that the Lord was near?

The Bible tells us that the coming of the Lord should be a reason to rejoice. God in Christ comes not to destroy us but to save us.

The angels told the shepherds the incredible good news that a Savior was coming into their dark world. And that good news was not just for the shepherds. It was for the whole world. It is good news for you and me.

Joy to the world the Lord has come. That's what we sing.
But, do we live it? Do we look redeemed?

JOY AND GENTLENESS

Joy means more than just pasting a plastic smile on our face. The look of redemption, the look of joy is seen most clearly in the way that we treat others.

Paul told the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always Let your gentleness be known to everyone."

The truly joyful person is a gentle person. This word can also be translated forbearance. Forbearance means to show patience and restraint in our dealings with others. It can also refer to an extension of time for the payment of a debt.

It seems to me that this is another way of saying, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." A gentle, forbearing spirit comes naturally to the one who continually rejoices in the grace of God.

It's important to note that Paul does not encourage a gentle spirit from a safe house. Remember that Paul wrote this letter from prison.

And the recipients of this letter, the Philippians faced certain persecution and even death. The Roman government viewed the Christian faith with great suspicion. Christians after all insisted on saying Jesus is Lord instead of saying Caesar is lord.

The Romans took a dim view of such political sacrilege.

But, in this world of hostility and suspicion, Paul advocates a gentle spirit.

Paul does not tell the Philippians to fight or to flee. Paul does not counsel preemptive violence.

The Philippians are not to be conformed to the ways of the world. Instead, the Philippians are counseled to transform the world by acting in a surprising way. He tells them to meet hostility with joy and gentleness.

They are to let their gentleness be evident to all, and that presumably meant their enemies as well as friends.

You could say that meeting hostility with a gentle spirit is naive. And it is true that the gentle spirits have often been martyred for their faith. This eventually happened to the apostle Paul himself.

But, I believe that there is power in gentleness and forbearance. In this spirit we testify to our belief that the Lord is near and that his peace will guard us, if not in body at least in our hearts and minds.

One thing that blocks joy is a desire for revenge and an angry spirit. Tit for tat violence has long been a staple of how the world does business.

But, the Savior, the king who comes does not plan to go along with business as usual.

He is known as the Prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6). And the angels still bring us the message of peace on earth and good will toward men and women.

As the Apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Ephesians, Christ “came and preached peace” (Ephesians 2:17), and he is our peace (Ephesians 2:14).

PRACTICING PEACE

Pastor John Thomas tells of a visit to the Beirut, Lebanon. He was going to a refugee camp where Palestinians had lived hemmed in for nearly six decades.

They were unwanted in Lebanon and much of the rest of the world, and unable to return home. It’s a place filled with rage, weapons, Syrian soldiers, Lebanese police and the Hezbollah militia.

John said that during his visit to Lebanon for reasons that had not always been quite clear to him he had always been accompanied by four heavily armed guards from the Presidential security detail.

John didn’t particularly like having the guards around, but when they got to the refugee camp he found their presence to be reassuring.

But, their guide, a retired professor from the American University in Beirut and a volunteer for the Middle East Council of Churches, made it clear to the guards that they would not be coming with them into the refugee camps.

Hurried phone calls were made and arguments were offered but the guide was adamant. He said,

“If we go in with guns, the people will be frightened and suspicious. We won’t be safe. But, the people know me; they know the church. They know that we are friends. With me you’ll be safe.”

John concluded,

“And so we marched into this cauldron of frustration and violence and rage, armed not with weapons but with the witness of the church’s love. ‘Let your gentleness be known to all.’”

Notice that before we could light the candle of joy we had to light the candles of love and peace. True joy is based upon love and peace. True joy comes when we refuse to accept the cynicism and violence of our world as the final answer.

Do you want to know the joy of the Lord? Do you want to experience His presence?

Bring a spirit of gentleness to the people you meet this day. Even those who are filled with fear and suspicion can be transformed by the power of peace and love.

FACING THE ANXIETY

Now you might say something like, “Pastor that’s okay for you to say. It’s your job to be peaceful and loving, but you don’t know what I’m going through. My life is filled with anxiety. I have children to raise, bills to pay and a tension filled job.”

Anxiety is a fact of life ... for everyone. And anxiety can rob us of joy. We’ve already said that Paul and the congregation in Philippi faced anxiety provoking situations. Their very lives were threatened.

And yet, Paul, writing from prison blithely says,
“Have no anxiety about anything ...”

How can Paul say something like that given his current circumstance?

It’s almost like he’s quoting that empty headed song from a few years back that went, “Don’t worry. Be happy!”

The Christmas season is in many ways a season of anxiety. Once again we have the pressure to buy the right gift and deal with difficult family members.

For many when they are greeted with a cheery Merry Christmas (or the more irritating, politically correct Happy Holidays) it just serves as a reminder of how difficult things are for many.

How can we rejoice and be calm and gentle in a world filled with pain and sorrow?

I am reminded of a song that played on the radio at Christmastime many years ago.

It was a version of silent night that was interrupted periodically by terrible news flashes ... stories of atrocities committed during the war ... stories of prejudice and the struggle for civil rights ... stories of riots, murder and mayhem.

And all the while the sweet song of Bethlehem played in the background, “Silent night. Holy night. All is calm. All is bright.”

That was very effective. It demonstrated the contrast between a season that celebrated the Prince of Peace over against a world that was anything but peaceful.

Today is not all that different from yesterday. We sing Silent Night. We talk about the Prince of Peace.

But, the world is filled with violence and sorrow.

How can we rid ourselves of anxiety and be a peaceful, joyful people when we live in a world that is anything but calm and bright?

PEACE IN THE MIDST OF FEAR

It’s important for us to remember that Jesus wasn’t born into a peaceful, anxiety free world. On the contrary from the very beginning the Herods of the world sought to kill him, and they eventually got the job done.

But, Jesus told us that the outcome was never in doubt. In the end the powers of darkness would not win. Even a cross and a grave could not defeat the love and grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Our text for today does not say that we will be spared hard times or pressure packed lives. But, it does say that in light of the fact that “the Lord is near” we need not be overcome by our fears. The world is (in the final analysis) God’s world. The ultimate outcome of things is not in doubt.

Paul tells the persecuted Philippians that the antidote to worry is prayer ... prayer and thanksgiving. In the midst of hard times (“in everything”) we are encouraged to trust in the Lord.

We show our faith in God by continuing to make our requests while at the same time not forgetting to surround those prayers with thanksgiving. If the Lord is near, then our prayers do not go unheard and that is more than enough reason for gratitude.

Notice that there is not promise here that our petitions will be granted in just the way we would like. But, what is promised is the peace of God.

The peace of God stands guard over our lives. The peace of God is like a sentry that stands watch over our hearts and minds.

In a world filled with paralyzing fear we are given the peace of God “that passes all understanding.” The reason this peace is hard to understand is that we tend to connect peace with the absence of conflict and anxiety.

But, this passage suggests that God’s peace can come to us in the midst of and in spite of hard times.

These are anxious times. The harried, frenetic days before Christmas are often filled with anxiety. There are many who will experience little joy this season.

But, we are invited to celebrate in a different way. We are invited to light the candle of joy.

You may have noticed that this Sunday the candle is a different color. It reminds us that the time approaches. Light is about to shine in the darkness. Joy is about to overcome despair.

On this day we are invited to remember that the Lord is near. We are invited to meet worry with prayer and thanksgiving.

We are invited to discover that our lives are protected by the peace of God, a peace that is above and beyond any fear we may have.

We cannot choose to escape the troubles of life, but we can choose how we respond to those troubles. We can use anxious times as an opportunity to deepen our walk with God. We can turn our worries into prayers.

Life is not just a series of random victories and tragedies. Life is a school that teaches us to trust God’s power and promises.

Throughout the Bible faith is described as a journey. Abraham was called by faith to leave home and go to the place that God would show him.

The children of Israel were called by faith to leave captivity in Egypt and travel through the desert to the Promised Land.

The wise men journeyed from afar to find the new king. And as the words from a popular Christmas card remind us,

“Wise men still seek him.”

Friends hear and believe the good news. The Lord is near, and he calls us to trust him on this journey.

Let us put aside our fears and go where he leads.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice.

Light the candle of joy today.

Amen.