

1Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, 17 pray without ceasing, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. 19 Do not quench the Spirit. 20 Do not despise the words of prophets, 21 but test everything; hold fast to what is good; 22 abstain from every form of evil.

23 May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 24 The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

## COMFORT AND JOY

“Comfort and joy,” do you know where I read those words?

No, not in that famous hymn, God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen. I read those words on a billboard as I drove to Orlando last Monday.

McDonald’s wanted us to purchase a little “comfort and joy” by buying a fancy coffee during this “holiday” season.

I said out loud, “Come on guys. Who do you think you are kidding? Can we really get comfort and joy from a cup of overly sweet coffee?”

And yet, don’t we all try to do that in one way or another? Our comfort and joy may not be coffee (although you might not want to be around me if I don’t have my quota of coffee for the day), but we all have those things that we turn to when the going gets rough.

What is your comfort food? Is it chocolate? Is it meat loaf, mashed potatoes and gravy? Maybe you seek to avoid the difficulties of life by doing a little therapeutic shopping? There are many ways, big and small that we attempt to bring a little comfort and joy into our lives.

I’m not against that. As long as you don’t go over budget, eat too much and raise your cholesterol and blood sugar, I say enjoy!

But, let’s not kid ourselves.

Coffee and cookies will not bring us comfort and joy. Turkey and dressing will not bring us comfort and joy. Friends, we have a hunger in our lives that even the blue plate special can’t satisfy.

And that hunger is not for more stuff. Stuff may make us happy for a while. But, soon the happiness fades. That new car soon loses that new car smell. Even the best gift is temporary.

## LIGHTING THE CANDLE OF JOY

We need something that brings us hope and joy in good times and bad. The Bible has an answer. Does the phrase “good tidings of great joy” ring a bell?

Joy is the good news that we did not expect. Joy is the good news that comes from upon high. Joy is God’s gift to the world.

I’ve heard different explanations about what the Advent candles stand for, but the third Sunday is always the same. The rose-colored candle (I know, it looks pink) but the rose-colored candle stands for joy.

This is the Sunday that joy breaks out. Today there is a hint of things to come.

Today we imagine a joy that is not dependent on what we can do or what we can see. It is a joy based upon what God has promised.

## NEW TESTAMENT JOY

And that’s why Paul can tell the church at Thessalonica, a church in the middle of persecution and uncertainty, “Rejoice always.”

If you study the use of the word joy in the New Testament, you will find that it is an emotion that seems to be impervious to circumstances. It is not an emotion based upon favorable experience, but a divine gift based upon faith.

Paul told the church at Thessalonica to rejoice always, and Paul had the same message for the church at Philippi. He wrote, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.” (Philippians 4:4)

In the book of James we read these words about joy, “My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.”

When Paul and Silas were imprisoned for preaching the gospel, how did they respond? They kept the other prisoners awake by joyfully singing hymns to God at midnight!

We often hear people talk about “making it through Christmas.” They say something like, “If I can only make it through Christmas, then I’ll be okay.”

That doesn’t sound like comfort and joy to me. Apparently this so-called “holiday season” we have created in the place of the Christmas does not bring us what we really need.

In a world filled with hustle and bustle, Christians talk about quiet and wonder. In a world filled sound and fury, Christians talk about a “peace that passes all understanding” and a silent, holy night.

In a world where people blithely say “happy holidays”, we talk about comfort and joy. And we’re not talking about McDonald’s coffee!

## JOY HAS US

Over the years our choir has returned to a favorite anthem, “I’ve Got Joy.” It’s a rousing tune that everyone seems to enjoy.

But, upon reflection I think the theology is wrong in that song. We don’t have joy. Joy has us.

In other words salvation does not come from what little comfort and joy we can provide for ourselves. Comfort and joy come from what God in Christ has graciously chosen to give us and continues to give us each and every day. Comfort and joy come from seeing the hand of God in our lives.

We “rejoice always” not because we are fools and choose to ignore the pain in the world and in our own lives. We rejoice always because the Spirit of God in Christ has redeemed us.

As we put it last week, Christ is born in us. The Spirit of the living God has come into our lives, and that changes everything.

That’s why this joy doesn’t go away with the passing of the “Holiday Season” or the tragic events that are a part of every life. This joy is eternal. This joy outlasts the pain of the moment.

How did the Psalmist put it? “Weeping may linger in the night, but joy comes in the morning.” Psalm 30:5

In the kingdom of God joy is always around the corner. The darkest night cannot contain the power of God’s salvation.

## PRAY WITHOUT CEASING

I think the rest of the statements in our lesson for today follow from this basic understanding. If divine joy has invaded our lives forever and enables us to rejoice always, then all of life becomes a conversation with God.

We can, as Paul put it, “pray without ceasing.”

Our understanding of prayer is too limited. We think of prayer as that brief time when we bow our heads and ask for God’s blessing before a meal or in the liturgy of the church. But, prayer is more than just a one-way communication with God a few times a week.

Prayer is an attitude. Prayer is recognizing that God a part of the conversation each and every day. Prayer is trying to put all our experiences in a divine perspective.

It is what a 17<sup>th</sup> century monk by the name of Brother Lawrence called “practicing the presence of God.”

We live looking for the love and joy of God. It is more than just positive thinking. It is godly thinking. It is a life lived in the light of God’s grace and salvation.

How would your life change if God were truly a part of every conversation? How would your life change if the promises of God were always on your mind? How would your life change if the grace and forgiveness of Jesus guided your every action?

That’s what it means to pray without ceasing. And I think that perspective would change all of us.

#### GIVING THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

And according to Paul this perspective allows us to “give thanks in all circumstances for this is the will of God in Christ for you.”

Just when you think that you’ve got Paul figured out he says something that seems even more outrageous.

Give thanks in all circumstances? Come on Paul. Be realistic. Some circumstances do not promote thanksgiving.

Each year during Christmas something happens that seems to contradict the claims of the season. We talk about peace on earth and good will but every year there’s a war or a financial crisis or something that just takes the wind out of our sails.

All of us have our own personal struggles. And some years, especially during this time of year, the pain seems too great to bear.

We find it hard to rejoice or pray or give thanks, and we certainly have a hard time thinking that this is “God’s will.”

God is not in favor of poverty, war and injustice. Sorrow and pain are the things that God promises to finally end one day. The Bible makes this very clear.

But, what are we to believe about the troubles that we face here and now? In the face of overwhelming struggles some people just quit trying. They lose hope in the promises of God.

## OLD TESTAMENT LESSONS

We need to remember how God works in our world. God is able to use everything for his glory. A good Old Testament example that I often use concerns the life of Joseph.

You know the story. His brothers sold him into slavery, but God used that negative experience for great good. Not only was Joseph saved, but his family was also saved. And his experience set the stage for the mighty acts of God that would follow.

There would be many more struggles for God's people. But, God would always lead them home. God would save them. God would preserve his people.

## THE CROSS

Of course, this theme is amplified in the story of the cross. God sent his Son into the world and what did the world do? The world murdered him.

Surely those are circumstances that seemed well beyond redemption. But, those circumstances were not too tough for God. The resurrection turned the cross, a means of execution, into a sign of salvation.

God is still working his purposes out through circumstances that are far from ideal.

We may not see it today, but when we look back on life we can sometimes see how God was blessing us and helping us come through the tough times. God's faithfulness in the past provides us with hope for the future.

That's why we can give thanks. That's how we can be content when things don't go how we would like them to go.

The joy of heaven has reached down and grabbed us. The power of God in Christ has transformed the world. The Spirit of God in Christ has transformed us.

## DO NOT QUENCH THE SPIRIT

Many of us love Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, and we especially love the character of Scrooge. Do you know why?

There are still Scrooges in our world today. We know who they are. Some are even on TV. Some are even in church.

These people scoff at the possibility of joy. These people prefer to live in their own self-made darkness, pouring cold water on every possibility. They (as Paul put it) quench the Spirit.

How can we keep from joining their ranks? I would propose that the answer is found in giving thanks. When we start to give thanks we can feel our spirit perk up. We can feel the joy of God well up inside us.

I like the way William Sloane Coffin put it. He wrote in his last book, *Credo*, “Joy is the most important Christian emotion. Duty calls only when gratitude fails to prompt.”

This is profoundly true. If you want to motivate people, the call to duty will work only for a season. But, the call of joy and gratitude lasts for a lifetime.

But, where do we find joy when it seems to leave? God’s people have always had spiritual down time.

Consider, for example, the words of the Psalmist who pleaded “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” (Psalm 51:12) Where can we find hope when hope is in short supply?

### THE PROPHETIC WORD

Paul suggests in our lesson for today that we should not “despise” or “cast aside” the words of the prophets. In other words he reminds us that God’s Word is given to us through the prophets as a means of grace.

If our spirits are low, if joy has left our life, if we do not feel connected to God, then maybe the problem is that we have neglected God’s Word.

Instead of overindulging in the things of this world and the spirit quenching negativity that permeates our culture, we are invited to enter the world of the prophets.

As we have seen in our past two Advent lessons, the prophets tell us that God makes a way in the desert. God makes a way where there seems to be no way.

God brings comfort to a people who feel alone and abandoned. God tells us that our sins are forgiven, and we will lead us back home.

It is God’s Word that enables us to turn from the evil and cling to those things that are good. It is God’s Word that points us toward God’s future and points us away from that fearful future proclaimed by the prophets of doom on CNN.

It is God’s Word that transforms us, sanctifies us and prepares us for the holy mystery that comes.

### TWO KINDS OF PEOPLE

Carlile Marney talks about two kinds of people in his writing. He talks about “basement” people and “balcony” people.

Basement people are the naysayers, the ones who always think of reasons why something can't be done. They rob life of joy and energy. They quench the spirit.

On the other hand, there are the ones he calls the "balcony people." The balcony people encourage us and cheer us on as we strive. They seek to lift us up instead of dragging us down. The balcony people fill our lives with joy and energy. They kindle the Spirit.

I wonder. What are we? Are we balcony people or basement people?

Do we drag people down into the basement of an unforgiving, thankless and joyless attitude? Or do we lift people up on the arms of forgiveness and joy, prayer and thanksgiving?

Friends, this is truly the season of comfort and joy. With the apostle Paul I encourage you to rejoice always. Make your whole life a statement of faith, a living testimony to the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

We have lit the candle of joy in our service.

Light the candle of joy in your life.

Amen.