

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 3:7-18
Zephaniah 3:14-20
Canticle 9
Philippians 4:4-7

December 12, 2021
The Third Sunday of Advent

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

There is a powerful contradiction in today's readings. To set up the contradiction I want us to focus on, let's first establish the setting for Paul's letter to the church in Philippi. In our reading from Philippians this morning, we find Paul in prison. And, what do we learn about him in this brief passage? We learn he is joyful and at peace.

The contradiction I find is this...it's the ability that we see in Paul to hold both joy and pain together. To rejoice and at the same time to lament. To give thanks and to carry heavy burdens.

It's a contradiction that frankly may be confusing at times. How can our faith allow us to be in the midst of despair and at the same time, praise God? How can you face adversity and also feel peace? Some would argue...if God were God, why do you have to face those bad things to begin with? Didn't you pray for answers or for a cure or for a resolution? And, if you didn't get that resolution and are still stuck in prison (however you might define your own prison)...how can you be thankful?

Paul's words can be confusing. They can seem like an impossible standard, a too high expectation. But to understand the power of Paul's letter remember...Paul is facing an unknown future, staring down his own fears, and yet he is expressing joy. Paul knows this critical point (and I have preached on it many times)...faith doesn't erase the circumstances that hurt us. But it is faith, that makes life worth living. It is faith that provides purpose. It gives us something to be thankful for, something to believe in, something worth praising. *Rejoice in the Lord...always.* No matter what. Rejoice because we follow an awesome God and we trust that God is with us in all times and in all places.

Here is what I find especially poignant about the passage from Philippians...Paul holds this conviction of joy because even in midst of terrible hardship, he takes time to reflect on what is good. On the people who have cared for him and prayed for him. He expresses his gratitude for their shared ministry of spreading the Gospel. And even though he is literally bound in chains, he still gives thanks because of how God has worked in and through his life. And from his place of gratitude for all he has been given, for all of the people he has encountered, for all of the love Christ has bestowed upon him, he feels an overwhelming sense of gratitude. *⁶Do not worry*

about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

How many times have you heard the next verse in our passage...*the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Jesus Christ...*and thought...not with this pain that in the deepest part of my heart, not with this grief that has overshadowed my life, not with this shame that has overtaken me. How in the world can I feel peace? When you feel that way, reading these words telling us to believe that peace is possible can feel absurd. A mountain too high. A problem too big. But remember...Paul has been there, done that kind of guy. He knows what he is talking about. And he wants us to know it too.

And the biblical witness, the good news of Jesus coming into this world is a profound realization that joy in the midst of hardship is not only possible, it's inherent in what God has promised us through the birth of Jesus Christ. Our human struggles can coexist with God's faithful provision for our lives and allow us to rise above. That is the good news of great joy that is going to walk right beside you in ways you can't even imagine or comprehend just yet.

⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

When nothing seems possible and yet, everything is peaceful. When you feel hopeless and fall on your knees in prayer and begin to feel joy. Rejoice in the Lord...always. Even if you don't comprehend it just yet...rejoice because God loves you and Christ is about to be born to bring this peace right into your heart.

It is a powerful Advent message. It's the Good News made manifest in each and every one of our lives in a way that stands up to every contradiction, to every impossibility, and brings forth peace to this broken world and to the brokenness within ourselves.

And, here is why the contradiction works...because this peace, God's peace, is not of this world. It's something so entirely different. We can try day in and day out to find redemption through all kinds of worldly things. We can find temporary respite through our work, through what we buy or what we drink or where we live. We can numb what hurts by turning to all sorts of negative distractions. But you know these things will never bring lasting peace. They only keep us entangled in pain and wanting.

So, when you find yourself in those kinds of entangled moments, I want you to remember Paul's words...*⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*

The ability to alleviate the worry or the pain, requires holding the contradiction. Holding your pain and holding God's love. Acknowledging your darkness and embracing your light.

⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul reminds us that there is something so much greater than whatever adversity you may be facing. There is something so much greater than your pain or your shame or your guilt or your despair or your grief.

And, that is why we can rejoice.

Carla Works, Professor of New Testament at Wesley Theological Seminary, wrote that how believers in Christ behave in hard times reveals a lot about their vision of the good news. Because...Rejoicing does not negate or turn a blind eye to despair. Rejoicing does not somehow make the suffering go away or minimize the injustice. Rather, rejoicing acknowledges that we are serving the one and only God who can rectify the wrongs, who can—and has—stood in solidarity with the oppressed.

By rejoicing, we claim that sin does not have the last word. Suffering does not define our future. The Good News is that Jesus Christ is coming into this world and into our lives. To redeem us. To heal us. To give us hope. And indeed, to give us joy.

Thanks be to God. Amen.