

REJOICE!
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday in Advent, 2021
Philippians 4:4-7

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Reading from before, Philippians 4:4-7: **⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all people! The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything but in everything make your requests known to God by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving! ⁷ The peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will also guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

It is now only two short weeks till Christmas when we shall join with the shepherds in welcoming Jesus. What more can we do than rejoice! **“Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: Rejoice!”** Christmas is coming!

But this isn't what Paul was writing about to the Church at Philippi. He wrote about two ladies who were not getting along in the Church and appealed to the Philippians to help these women live in harmony in the Lord. He acknowledged them as co-workers in the Gospel and said that they, along with others who shared in the work of the Gospel, had their names written in the Book of Life.¹

The Church hasn't changed much over the centuries. God's people still find it difficult to live in harmony with one another, even though they are true and sincere Christians. They may have something against another - nothing big, mind you, just a clash of opinions or personalities. This one does too much; that one does too little. Perhaps someone pushes their agenda too hard or seems to sit back and let everyone else carry the load. Sometimes it is that someone is just too outspoken. Sometimes someone says something foolish without thinking, and it sticks. Someone makes a mistake, and forgiveness is not forthcoming. Grudges are held on to. We've all seen these things happen, and it can be uncomfortable.

Paul urged then, and I am sure he would urge today, that we find harmony in the Lord Jesus; after all, we are all, together, the Church, and our names have been written in the Book of Life, as well. Our conduct - especially toward one another - ought to reflect that wonderful reality: Our names are in the Book of Life!

Surely that calls for a celebration. **“Rejoice in the Lord always!”** Rejoice that our sins have been forgiven. Rejoice in the love of God. Rejoice in the fact that we have been chosen by God for life eternal! We have everything this world has to offer - and more. *We have salvation*. Whatever else is going on, we want to keep in mind that this world is not the main event. As we watch it corrode and corrupt, we should be grateful that this is not all there is.

We must focus on the real things and set our affections on the stuff that really matters. That is what Paul is saying. We are getting closer to a federal election. For some, listening to all the goings-on in parliament and so forth may be exciting; for others, it is frequently *frustrating*. Whichever party you support, remember, ***God is in charge***. If you are a sports fan, watching cricket may be enjoyable. How your team does can be exciting - or exasperating - but whether they win or lose doesn't change much of the day-to-day of life and certainly will not be a factor in heaven. He who dies with the most toys is still, finally, dead, so possessions, although alluring and tempting, have to take a back seat to the real issues of life or death - heaven or hell. And we have the question of heaven or hell answered in Jesus Christ - so **“Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: Rejoice!”**

This rejoicing is not because it feels good - although at times, it does. This rejoicing is due to the love of God, the promise of salvation, the forgiveness of sins, and the hope of resurrection and eternal life. These are all delightful things, especially if you have faced - or face even now - illness, death, sorrow, or shame over sins. To rejoice, however, requires that we focus on Jesus and the Gospel. We shall not be rejoicing over that which we do not even stop to consider. And our lives are to be lives of rejoicing! So, rejoice!

¹ Philippians 4:2-3

Paul says to **“Let your gentleness be evident to all people!”** Since we are among those who know that their own sins are horrible - and yet they have been forgiven - we are patient and forgiving. Knowing the truth about our bondage in sin, and that the only power to free us from slavery to sin and evil is the power of Christ in us and for us, we are understanding with those who are still caught in the power of evil, and with those injured by it. Having heard the command of Christ to overcome evil with good², and being clear that we cannot overpower it by our own strength or will, and knowing that our passions - though easily stimulated by life and the wrongs others may do to us - have no power to accomplish what we need and desire to do, we are patient with others who are also caught in weakness and sin. What we are commanded here to do only God and His Word and His presence can achieve. So, we are gentle and, like our Lord, fair.

The Child of God is fundamentally a good person - though not good by nature, but by the Gospel at work in him or her by the power of the Holy Spirit, who helps us apply to our life what we confess and believe. Words such as “patient, kind, forgiving, and thoughtful” can be used to describe the Christian - but not the word “tolerant.” We can (and do) forgive, but we do not simply tolerate. We do not tolerate false doctrine, for that muddies the clear streams of God’s crystal truth. We do not tolerate evil but *call it by its name*. We forgive when one repents, when one confesses and seeks forgiveness, but we don’t quietly put up with evil just because it demands a right to exist. We stand confessing the truth and point in the direction of the holy, while opposing sin and protecting the weak and the innocent – humbly and firmly, but gently. Our stand against abortion is an example of such. Even though our society permits abortion and doesn’t want to hear us talk about it, we stand firm and resolute on the side of life.

Our motivation is simple: **“The Lord is near.”** That speaks about His presence in our lives, and it speaks about the truth of His coming again soon. We live in Him, and we live for Him, and we live like Him because we expect to see Him - and that right soon! **“The Lord is near.”** He is close enough to hear our prayers and answer them and bless us. We are never alone or left merely to our own resources. He is near enough to guide us and keep us. He is near enough to strengthen us and aid us. He is right at hand, to witness our holy and decent lives and dealings, and to hold to account anyone who would trample His faithful servants in their humble and gentle behaviour, and He is coming again.

The time of His coming is closer now than ever before. Of course, that makes sense. The trick is to remember that *He really is coming*. It becomes too easy at times to say, “*Yeah, He is coming again – someday...*” and let it go, living as though He were not real, and not coming anytime soon. You probably know many people who have done that. You may even have done it yourself once or twice. Such carelessness about holiness and such a casual attitude toward sin is common, and it is the temptation of the world and of the old evil foe to dismiss God and live as though He were not a factor. But He is, and He is coming sooner rather than later. **“The Lord is near.”** Rejoice!

Because the Lord is near, we can ask Him for anything at any time. Paul says, **“Do not worry about anything but in everything make your requests known to God by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving!”** Do not worry about anything. Do not allow fear to take over for any reason but turn to the Lord. Remember, the consistent command of the Lord whenever He appeared to men in Scripture was, *“Do not fear!”* So we must not let anything rob us of our peace and security and rejoicing but pray about it. Ask God. And give thanks. Life is a gift. Prayer is a gift. His answer is to be expected, and He will not leave any of us hanging out to dry - so give thanks. Every prayer should be with thanksgiving because all that we are and have comes from Him *freely*. It is a gift, and He has promised to hear our prayers and answer them, each one. Jesus has even told us to pray to the Father *because He loves us Himself* - and that because we love Jesus and trust in Him. So we give thanks. Or, to put it another way, we rejoice!

This is the urgent exhortation of Paul at the end of his letter to the believers in Philippi. It is really nothing more than an encouragement to put our trust in God in action and be deliberately Christian. Picture Paul sitting with friends, counselling them on how to go forward in their new lives as God’s holy people. There are a million things he could tell them, and he could spin out rules for powerful, abundant, successful living as well as any modern television preacher today. But he doesn’t. He reduces it all to the essentials – **“Rejoice in the Lord always!”** *“Rejoice! Let your humility and patience and goodness be evident to everyone you come in contact with. Don’t allow yourselves to worry*

² Romans 12:21

or be frightened by life, but take everything to the Lord in prayer - ask Him, and give thanks for all He does for you each day - all that He has done for you and given to you in Jesus Christ.” Then he adds the kicker, “If you do this, (or, when you do this) **The peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will also guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**”

God will keep you. The peace of God doesn't make sense to the world around us in the face of the troubles we face from time to time. When we confront horrible events, people wonder how we can have peace. It doesn't seem reasonable or logical in the light of the sorrows or in the light of how life will go at times. It didn't make sense when Christians in the first centuries of the Church sang hymns and prayed out loud with thanksgiving while being tortured and persecuted. It didn't make sense, **but it made an impression!** What a witness they gave in those circumstances. It is a peace that God gives and establishes in us *through faith*. Oddly, it comes from the cross, peace from an instrument of torture and death and injustice.

But that torture was meant for us. That was our death that Jesus died there. The injustice was that He suffered it all without deserving it, and we, who deserve it, are rescued from it. What a wonderful injustice! We call it grace! How delightful that we have forgiveness and life and salvation, given as free gifts to us. Men spend their lives trying to deserve something like this and fail, but God just bestows it like a Christmas present. In fact, it was given precisely as a Christmas present. “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to people whom He favours!*” (Luke 2:14).

Dear friends, when we walk through life in faith, God is well-pleased. While we are imperfect, with Jesus, when our Father looks at us, He sees Jesus' love and Jesus' holiness and the payment with which Jesus has met our shortcomings and sins. He is pleased - well-pleased. So “**Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: Rejoice!**”

Live as though all that you believe is true - and powerful in your life and in your thinking and give thanks. Relax and enjoy life, and let God do all the worrying. After all, we are His chosen people, and He is the God of our salvation.³ Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

O God, Shepherd of Your people, You have led Your flock in mercy throughout long years of promise. You have sustained them, and given them hope through Your Son Jesus Christ. Give us all steadfast faith in Your mercy, that we may rejoice and give thanks each passing day, and be ready for Jesus' second coming.

In Your presence, we offer You our prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving. Forgive us our sins and wipe out our many transgressions. By Your Holy Spirit renew us with Your gracious gifts.

Open the eyes of those who are spiritually blind. Guide those who are lame and stumbling. Heal those who are diseased in their thoughts, words, and deeds. Lead all people to believe in Him whom You have sent, and to follow the things that are good, true, and lasting, and pleasing to Your Son Jesus Christ.

We pray for Your Church throughout the world. Bless all who preach and teach Your Word, that many more may come to know You as the only true God and Saviour of mankind. Rule over the hearts of all people. Guide the decisions of those in authority, and sit in the councils of the nations, that peace and justice may prevail everywhere.

Bless all who have gathered here today in Your house. Be with those of our congregation who are sick or afflicted in any way in body, mind, or spirit. Grant that in their trials they may learn of Your gracious power, and of Your readiness to help in every time of need.

Pour out Your grace on us all, that we may be enabled each day to show forth the glory of Your name, and to witness to Your saving truth in Jesus Christ our Lord. Give us these things, and whatever else You know we need, in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.

³ Isaiah 12:2

THIRD SUNDAY IN ADVENT

Zephaniah 3:14-20

¹⁴ Cry out in jubilation, daughter Zion! Shout, Israel! Rejoice and triumph with all your heart, daughter Jerusalem! ¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you. He has turned away your enemy. The King of Israel, the LORD, is among you. You will not fear calamity any longer. ¹⁶ On that day Jerusalem will be told, “Do not be afraid, Zion! Do not let your hands hang limp! ¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is among you. He is a Warrior, who saves. He will rejoice happily over you. He will reduce you to silence in His love. He will exult over you with shouts of joy.” ¹⁸ “I shall gather those who are grieving because of the festival. They have been absent from you. The burden on Zion has been disgrace. ¹⁹ Look! At that time, I shall deal with all who are oppressing you. I shall save those who are lame. I shall gather those who have been scattered. I shall change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth. ²⁰ At that time I shall bring you in, yes, at the time when I gather you together. For I shall make you famous and praised among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes before your eyes.” This is what the LORD has said.

Philippians 4:4-7

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always! I shall say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all people! The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry about anything but in everything make your requests known to God by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving! ⁷ The peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, will also guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Luke 7:18-35

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported to him about all these things. ¹⁹ Then John called two of his disciples and sent them to ask the Lord, “Are You the One who is coming or are we to expect someone else?” ²⁰ The men came to Jesus and said, “John the Baptist has sent us to ask You, ‘Are You the One who is coming or are we to expect someone else?’” ²¹ At that time Jesus had healed many people of their diseases, afflictions and evil spirits and had given sight to many who were blind.

²² Jesus answered, “Go and report to John what you have seen and heard! Blind people see, lame people are walking, lepers are made clean, deaf people hear, the dead are raised, and poor people are having the good news told them. ²³ Blessed is anyone who is not offended because of Me!”

²⁴ After the messengers of John had left, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ²⁵ What, then, did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft robes? No, those who wear splendid clothing and live in luxury are found in kings’ palaces. ²⁶ What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is the one about whom Scripture has said: ‘Look! I am sending My messenger ahead of You, who will prepare Your way before You.’ ²⁸ I tell you, among those born to women no one is greater than John; but the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.”

²⁹ When all the people, even the tax-collectors, heard John, they acknowledged that God was right when they were baptised with the baptism of John. ³⁰ However, when the Pharisees and the lawyers were not baptised by John, they rejected God’s purpose for themselves.

³¹ “Therefore, to what shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the market-place and calling out to one another. They say: ‘We have played the flute for you, but you have not danced. We have sung a funeral song, but you have not wept.’ ³³ For John the Baptist has come, neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ ³⁴ The Son of Man has come, eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!’ ³⁵ Nevertheless, wisdom is proved right by all her children.”