



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Rejoice!

Philippians 4:2-9

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A few minutes ago we lit the fourth of our Advent candles: the candle of peace. Love, hope, joy, and now peace—these are all things that Jesus brought us in his first advent. In Jesus we see the love of God for sinners, the love of God incarnate in the Incarnate Word of God. In Jesus and because of that love we have hope—hope for redemption, hope for resurrection, hope for new life and a new world. And so in Jesus we have joy. In his death and resurrection he has set us free from our bondage to sin and death. We live with the joy of slaves set free. And finally, today, we're reminded that Jesus has brought us peace. By his death our sins have been forgiven. You and I have peace with God—Jesus reconciled us with him. We who were once rebels are now God's friends, ready to take up the vocation he gave us in the beginning—to be his image-bearers in the world—and to live our lives before his face.

And yet these things—love, hope, joy, and peace—they're not just good feelings between us and God. They *should* change the way we live—obviously, the way we live in relation to God, but also the way we live with each other, the way we live with our families, and the way we live in the world. The love, the hope, the joy, and the peace that Jesus gives should engulf our lives and every aspect of how we live—as we live in light of Jesus' first advent and as we wait for his second advent.

Our Epistle this morning is just a few short verses taken from Philippians 4. St. Paul talks about rejoicing and about peace—two of these “Advent

virtues”—but it's telling that immediately before he writes about this, he writes a verse directly to two of the women in the Philippian church. Their names were Euodia and Syntyche. In verse 2 he entreats them to “agree in the Lord”. In verse 3 he entreats his “true companion”—probably Epaphroditus, who was carrying this letter to Philippi—to help them to get along. We have no idea what happened between these two women. All we know is that Paul says that they are fellow believers and that they were fellow labourers with him at one point in the past. But now they've had some kind of disagreement and they're at odds with each other. It's the sort of thing that could and still does sometimes tear a church apart as people take sides. So Paul urges them to make up and he reminds them of the grounds for that: they should agree in the Lord. He's calling on them to remember that they share a common life in the Lord Jesus. They share the same source of love and hope and joy and peace and that part of having that love, hope, joy, and peace is living out the practical implications, the real-life ramifications in the church and in our families, and in the world. It's so easy to forget about Jesus when something goes wrong. A brother or a sister does something that hurts us and the first thing we think about is “my rights”, about protecting myself, about getting back my honour. We so quickly forget about Jesus who gave up his rights—even to the point of dying on the cross—so that we could be reconciled to God. Paul reminds us that our first priority in light of Jesus should be reconciliation with each other—with living out the love and hope and joy and peace of Jesus in practical ways here and now and with each other.

But maybe the problem isn't so much another person as it's just “life”. Jesus has freed us from our bondage to sin and death. He's give us a promise of life and he's given a down-payment on that promise in the gift of the Holy Spirit, but all around us we still see pain and death and suffering and tears.

We still face all these things ourselves. Think of Paul and everything that he went through for the sake of Jesus. People not only hated him, but he was arrested, stoned, beaten, left for dead—many times over. Jesus promised life, but he also promised that his people would face the anger and rejection of the world just as he did. This is *why* he's filled us with love, hope, joy, and peace, because without his gifts we would never persevere. And this is why Paul writes in verse 4:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Don't fight with each other in the Church. Rejoice! Don't give up hope when you're faced with suffering or with sickness or with persecution or even with death. Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord *always*—in *everything*. Again, the joy Jesus gives us isn't meant to be some sort of abstract or theological thing that exists only between us and God. The joy Jesus gives touches everything, because Jesus isn't just about making *us* new, he's about making *all things* new. One day his joy will fill the whole earth—as we sing, “Joy to the word, the Lord is come!” It starts with us, with you and me and with all the saints of God. Rejoice in all things and especially when things are at their darkest. The prophet Micah wrote, “When I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me” (Micah 7:8). The prophet Habakkuk wrote:

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. (Habakkuk 3:17-18)

The book of Acts tells us how the first Christians, when they faced the violent persecution of the Jews, rejoiced to be counted worthy of suffering for the name of Jesus. If you read Acts and really think let it sink into you it's

striking just how full of joy those people were as they faced persecution and death. Think of Stephen, his face, Paul says, shining like the face of an angel as the people stoned him and all the while Stephen was praying for them—not for God to come down and smite his enemies, but that he would make himself known to them the way he'd made himself known to Stephen. That sort of thing isn't possibly by ordinary human standards. And that's why Paul doesn't just say to rejoice. He says to rejoice *in the Lord*. Rejoice in the life and in the hope that Jesus came to give in his first advent and that he's promised to bring to full fruit in his second advent. Brothers and Sisters, if the love and life and hope and peace of Jesus are truly in us they will work out in our lives in practical ways to every aspect of life. Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit, poured into us in our Baptism, will change everything—or, at least, it should change everything. The key is to let the Spirit change us, to let the Spirit work through every aspect of life, to let him regenerate our hearts and renew our minds. Sometimes we hold things back. We refuse to give over *that* relationship to Jesus. We refuse to give over that secret sin that no one else knows about. We refuse to give over our money or our pride to Jesus. Sometimes it's not a wilful refusal. Sometimes it's just a lack of maturity or some area of life we haven't even realised we're still holding tight to. This is why we need so badly to immerse ourselves in Scripture and to let it wash over us and to let God's Word permeate us and sink in and inform every part of life as we read it and think about it and meditate on it. It's why we need to be part of Christian fellowship with other believers who are themselves steeped in Scripture, who have learned themselves how to give those hard area of life over to Jesus. They can speak into our lives too. Brothers and Sisters, rejoice. *Rejoice...in the Lord...always and in all things.*

It helps to have some perspective on what Paul means when he says to rejoice. We tend to think of joy as something internal. It probably shows on the outside, but it doesn't have to. But in Paul's world and the world of the Philippians this idea of rejoicing had the sense of public celebration. The Greeks and Romans organized huge festivals to celebrate their gods and their cities. About the time Paul was working and writing some of the newest celebrations were in honour of a new god: Caesar. People would, with feasts and games, celebrate this new god who represented the imperial spirit. And in the middle of that, Paul is telling the Philippians: celebrate the real and true King. Celebrate that Jesus is Lord. Rejoice in the Lord to encourage each other, but rejoice in the Lord in a way that makes everyone around you constructively curious—in a way that makes them ask questions about your joy and its source, that makes them ask about—even want to be a part of—the kingdom of God.

Paul goes on in verse 5. As the work of Jesus permeates every area of our lives it should be obvious to everyone around us. He writes:

Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.

Let your *reasonableness* be known to everyone. The King James says, "Let your *moderation* be known unto all men." Other modern translations say to let our "forbearance", "gentleness", or "graciousness" be seen by all. The Greek word Paul uses isn't the easiest to translate. As the Greeks originally used the word it had the sense of not being the sort of person who insists on every right or letter of the law. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament it's used to describes God's *kindness* as the world's sovereign ruler. Paul uses it in other places to describe the *meekness* of Jesus. This is the character of Jesus. He was God, but rather than exploit what was his by right, he humbled himself for the sake

of his enemies, for the sake of us sinners. It's the idea of someone with great power, who has every right to be angry and to demand justice, instead choosing to show kindness and gentleness and to be merciful.

Here's what that means for us. Remember that God created us to be his stewards here on earth—to rule in his place. That's what it means to bear God's image. We chose instead to rebel. We've made a mess of God's Creation. But Jesus is now God's King. He's doing the job we rejected and messed up. And as part of his redemptive work, he's renewed and regenerated us, he's united us with himself, and he's now called us to bear his power and authority in the world as we make his kingdom known. And how does Jesus rule? He's not the King who throws his weight around and who forces everyone to get in line "or else". No, just the opposite. He's the King who gives his life for the sake of his people. And that's how we should be living in the world—not getting caught up in the conflict and fighting of the world, not always looking out for "Number One", but showing the same humility, gentleness, meekness and forbearing spirit that Jesus has shown to us. Remember, you and I were God's enemies. You and I were deserving of death. He has every right to destroy us and he has the power to do it instantly, but he has chosen to be gracious and merciful. But as we live the life of the Spirit he's given and as we come to understand the depth of his grace and mercy towards us, we should start being more gracious and merciful too. Our focus is less and less on ourselves and more and more on serving Jesus by serving others—and dealing with them, treating them the way Jesus would. One commentator writes: "Let us be ready to drop all that is ours, so that we may hold fast all that is Christ's; ready to drop earth that we may the better grasp heaven."

We need to remember Jesus' mission— why he became incarnate. It was for our sake and not only our sake, but for the sake of the world. St. John writes that he came not to condemn, but to redeem those who already stand condemned. And this is why Paul stresses, also in verse 5, that we do this because, "The Lord is at hand." Jesus will return, but this time when he returns he *will* be coming in judgement. He came the first time and went to the cross so that sinners would be redeemed. And he did that so that when he returns we won't have to suffer the just judgement of our righteous Creator. He came the first time so that we wouldn't have to suffer the consequences of our cosmic treason. In the meantime, he's given his Spirit to establish his Church and to build his kingdom. He promised that through the Holy Spirit he would finish what he started. That means we've got a lot of work to do. I suspect it'll be a long, long time before we've accomplished that work, but Jesus will be back when it's done and that's why we need to live the life Jesus gives through his Spirit. This is why we need to be rejoicing in all things and celebrating our King and his kingdom. This is why our reasonableness or our gentleness or our meekness needs to on display. Through our lives the King is made known to the world.

Paul knew this was a challenge. As easy as he makes it look, it's clear that it wasn't easy for Paul. It wasn't easy for Euodia and Syntyche. It's not easy for us. We get anxious. We get anxious about the hard things in life. We get anxious about our rights. We get anxious about rejection and persecution. And that's why Paul writes in verse 6:

Do not be anxious about anything...

He uses the same word that Jesus uses when he tells us in the Sermon on the Mount not to worry about tomorrow, but instead to seek first God's

kingdom and God's righteousness. Whatever may be happening today, God will vindicate his people. The day will come when he will wipe away every tear. But in the meantime he's placed us here for a purpose. You see, we often have this selfish desire—and that's what it is: selfish—we have this desire for Jesus to come back right now to deliver us from our troubles. But, Brothers and Sisters, we forget that God's desire isn't just for us to be saved from sin and death and from the judgement to come, he desires for all of humanity to be saved from judgement too. Think about it. You and I heard the good news and we've been delivered because someone else, because the generation before us suffered through trials and tribulations for the sake of Jesus and proclaimed the good news to you and to me. If Jesus had come back in answer to their prayers for deliverance and for the end you and I would be forever condemned. But Jesus tarried. You and I heard the good news. And now it's our turn to live through trials and tribulations so that we can tell the next generation that Jesus died and rose again, that he is Lord, that he came not to condemn, but to redeem, and that one day he's coming back.

Do not be anxious. We're people of *faith* and people of *hope*. So seek first Jesus and his kingdom and his righteousness and when you face trials and tribulations, when the tears are overwhelming, Paul says:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)

You and I serve a God whom we *know* to be good. We know with absolute certainty that he is good. How do we know? We've got a Bible full of evidence, but first and foremost, we know that he's good because of Jesus. In Jesus God himself gave his own life for his enemies.

I was thinking about what this would have meant in the world of Paul and the Philippians. What did they know of good gods? Think of the stories you know of the gods of the ancient world. Think of Odysseus or Hercules or Gilgamesh. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about myths from Babylon or Egypt or Greece or Rome. The stories are full of gods who do what they want, who play favourites with human beings, who fight with each other, who are unreliable, who get angry and punish people on a whim, who are out for their own satisfaction and glory. I think of some prayers that we've recovered from ancient Mesopotamia, prayers of a poor man who was facing trials and tribulations and who cried out to the gods in desperation. He didn't know which god to pray to. He didn't know which god he had offended. He didn't even know what his offense might be. He just knew that life was terrible and whether he'd done anything wrong or not, he had to placate the whims of some god or gods to make things right. Those were the gods the Greek and Romans knew. There's a reason why people were anxious and had no hope. And it's against that background that Paul tells the Philippians *not* to be anxious. Instead, they can pray to the one, true God. They can give thanks in all things, trusting that even when things are bad, God is truly and perfectly and always good. And they can bring their trials and their needs and their sorrow before him in faith because he is good. And they know that he is good because he is the God who loved his rebellious and sinful people so much that he gave his own life for them.

He goes on in verse 7:

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

The peace of God. Hardly a thing existed in the pagan world. People feared these unknown, capricious, and temperamental gods. And yet Paul writes that if we will pray to the God of Israel, if we will pray to the one, true God whom we know in Jesus the Messiah, he will surround us with his peace. His peace will guard our hearts and minds. The word Paul uses for guard is a powerful one. It's the sort of guarding that soldiers do around a besieged city. Brothers and Sisters, if we will trust in God—if we will rest secure in Christ—he will keep us *secure* in his peace—a peace that overcomes all the anxieties and worries and fears of the world, that gives us grace to have an eternal perspective in the midst of our trials and tribulations and sufferings.

Brothers and Sisters, our gods today are no more able to give peace than Caesar or Aphrodite or Mars or Mammon ever could. Our world lacks peace because things like power and wealth and beauty are fleeting—here today and gone tomorrow—and because there's always someone with more power or more beauty or more money. The world still needs Jesus as much today as it did then. Sinners still stand condemned and need to hear the good news that Jesus is the world's true Lord, the God who became man, the God who died and rose again out of love for his enemies. It's that love of Jesus that the world needs to see in us and hear from us as we live it out. It's the hope that Jesus gives, hope of redemption and hope of the life of the age to come that the world needs. Jesus has given us the Holy Spirit as a down-payment on that life and the world needs to see us living that life of the Spirit, the world needs to see us living in hope in the midst of pain and suffering and hopelessness. The world needs to see us rejoicing always and in everything. The world needs to see us celebrating King Jesus. And, Brothers and Sisters, the world needs to see the peace of God permeating our lives. We Christians face the same troubles

everyone else faces. We have just as much reason to be anxious as everyone else does. And that's why living the peace of God is such a powerful witness to Jesus. Our living in hope-filled and joyful peace puts our faith in Jesus on display for all to see.

Paul closes this last part of the body of his epistle telling them in verse 8:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Love, hope, joy, and peace. Live the fruit of the Spirit. Be the kingdom people Jesus describes in the Beatitudes. This is what it looks like to live in faith. But what may be the most powerful thing Paul says here is in verse 9. He writes to them:

What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul stayed in Philippi probably for a few weeks. And now he's writing to them and urging them: If you want to know God and if you want to know God's peace—and by implication, if you want to be the witnesses to the world of that peace so that they can know it too—do what I taught you to do and follow my example. Brothers and Sisters, which of us could say something like that? We should be able to say that. Imagine a non-believer or a brand-new believer spending a few weeks with the people of Living Word Church. We should be living in such a way that we should be able to say to that person: If you want to have and to know peace with God, put into practice what you've heard and what you've seen amongst us. You've seen the love, the hope, the joy, and the peace of the people here. We have faith in Jesus and these

things are the fruit of the life he gives. Now make that faith your own and know and live the love and hope and joy and peace of God yourself.

Let us pray: O Lord, come among us, we pray, with your power and strengthen us with your great might; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness we are grievously hindered in running the race that is set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be honour and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*