



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Rejoice in the Lord Always Philippians 4:4-7

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Advent is a call, a reminder to be prepared. The Creed reminds us of Jesus' first Advent. Think of the words we just recited: *for us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven...was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.* The Creed also reminds us that *he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead* and that *his kingdom shall have no end.* At his first Advent—and not just by his Incarnation, but particularly by his death and resurrection, Jesus has announced the defeat of sin and death and inaugurated God's new age. Advent reminds us that we live in the in-between, in the overlap the ages. In our baptism we have died with him, as Paul says, and if we have shared in a death like his, we look forward to a day when we will share in his resurrection. We look forward to the day when Jesus will return to finish what he began, the day when he sets all to rights and makes all things new—including us. Brothers and Sisters, we need Advent, because we're prone to forgetting and we're prone to becoming complacent about the future. We're prone to spiritual laziness. We know that we have a share in God's new world, but surrounded by the old age—its days may be numbered, its defeat may be certain, but it's still all around us—it's easy to lose perspective. We've been plunged into the Holy Spirit, we've given a taste of the kingdom and the life of God, but the world, the flesh, and the devil do their best to attract our attention. To live for Jesus and his kingdom is a challenge. Like Adam and Eve, we're tempted to lose faith in the goodness of God—to think that he's holding out on us. Like Israel in

the wilderness, it's easy to become bored with manna from heaven and to look back longingly to the fleshpots of Egypt. We need this annual reminder that there's more, that this isn't all there is, that this really is the in-between time and that Jesus surely will finish what he started. Advent reminds us of the faithfulness of God, revealed in Jesus, and bolsters and restores our faith and our hope. The light has come into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. The darker the night the more brightly the star of Bethlehem shines.

We read our Epistle today in the midst of the darkness. St. Paul declares to the Christians in Philippi:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4:4)

“Rejoice in the Lord *always!*” When things are good: rejoice. When things are bad: rejoice. When we can see God at work in obvious ways around us: rejoice. Even when it seems that God is absent, remember that Jesus was born, that Jesus died, that Jesus rose again and that none of it was for naught—and rejoice. We're a Christmas people. What Jesus has done for us permeates our whole lives every day and in every thing. We rejoice in all things, and that includes all of our troubles or anxieties or persecutions. In fact, our joy should be even more visible when we face tribulations. The prophet Micah wrote, “When I sit in darkness, the LORD will be a light to me” (Micah 7:8). 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, facing the persecution of the Jews rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer for his

name's sake. How did they do it? By worldly standards that kind of joy in the face of suffering just isn't possible. The answer is there in verse 4. St. Paul doesn't just tell us to rejoice. He tells us to rejoice *in the Lord.* Jesus gives us hope. In his first advent he did the hard part. He was born as one of us. He died. And he rose from the grave. We can be sure that he will return to finish what he started and to consummate his kingdom. In the meantime, he's also given us his own Spirit as a down-payment on the life and world to come. Jesus and the Spirit change everything.

And it really does change *everything*—or at least, it should. It's not just that we rejoice in all things. If we're living a life of joy, it *will* impact every area of our lives. Paul goes on in verse 5:

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 is hard to translate, but it's important, because Paul is describing the character that we should be displaying to the world—this is a key way we witness Christ in our lives. In 2 Corinthians 10, Paul describes this character in terms of the *meekness* of Jesus, but it's the kind of meekness that can only be displayed by the almighty God and Judge of the universe. When I see this word in Scripture I'm reminded of one of my brother's friends many years ago. He was a giant—about 6'8” and probably 350 pounds of muscle. He was a football player and the sort of guy who could pull your arms off. When he visited he'd sit on the floor, because he'd break just about any piece of furniture he'd sit on. And yet as powerful as he was, he was one of the most gentle people you'd ever meet. That's the idea here: great power and authority choosing to display profound gentleness. We have been united with

Christ. We bear his power and authority to the world. Paul even tells us that on the last day we will sit with him to judge the world. But instead of lording our status as co-heirs with God's own Son over the world and over the people around us, instead of getting caught up in the stress and conflict and fighting of the world, instead of looking out for "Number One", we show the same gracious, gentle, meek, 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. And as he changes our perspective—as he focuses our eyes on the age to come—our hearts should be becoming more gracious and merciful too—more like *his* heart. Our focus is less and less on this world, and more and more on Jesus, on his kingdom, and on the work of his kingdom. 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." Think of the old story of the kid crying because his hand is trapped in the cookie jar. His mother tries and tries, but it just won't come out. And that's when she realises that the reason his hand won't come out is because it's full of cookies. He's trapped in the cookie jar, but he isn't willing to let go of the cookies to get untrapped! As long as your hands are engaged in holding onto the things of the present age, you'll never be able to take hold of Jesus and the things of the age to come. And Paul reminds us why it's so important we have this perspective: "The Lord is at hand." Like Jesus, Paul had in mind the judgement that was soon to come on Jerusalem, but that judgement only serves to reinforce for us that God really does make good on his promises and that Jesus will return one day to judge the living and the dead, to wipe evil from Creation, and to make all things new. In our case the urgency

has more to do with our own limited time. "Man who is born of woman is few of days...he comes out like a flower and withers; he flees like a shadow and continues not." Brothers and Sisters, redeem those few days for the Lord and for his kingdom. Jesus could have come in judgement two thousand years ago, but that would have meant the destruction of us all, because we're all sinners. He died that men and women would have a means of forgiveness and redemption and he delays his return so that the Spirit, working through the Church, can proclaim the royal summons to the world. The in-between time, this overlap of the ages is still full of pain and sadness, but it also reveals the patience and mercy of God, who sent his Son not to condemn and destroy, but to redeem the condemned so that we will not be destroyed when he returns.

We need to maintain this faithful and hopeful perspective, because the old age, even as it passes away, will do everything it can to rob us of our faith and hope. Paul knew this—probably better than almost anyone. He says in verse 6:

Do not be anxious about anything,

He uses the same word that Jesus uses when he tells us in Matthew 6:34 not to worry about tomorrow, but instead to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness. We know the final outcome. God has already won the victory and if we are in Christ, we are on his victorious side. But he's left us here and given us time to proclaim his good news of forgiveness and life with all those people around us who are still slaves to sin and death—and we do that in part by showing our trust in him instead of worrying and being anxious about life. We need to realise that anxiety is sinful; at its root is a lack of faith in God's promises. Anxious people will never grow in the faith, and not only that, but they will

have a poor witness to the world! So instead of being anxious Paul says:

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

Here's where our spiritual rubber meets the road of faith. The way of the old age is to be anxious, because it offers no hope when life is difficult. Christians, on the other hand, know that we have a God who has already won the battle for us and who, in the meantime, will take care of our every need if we will only trust him. When life is hard the world gets anxious; the Christian prays and exercises his trust in God and hope in God's promises. The Christian trusts that God is at work in everything, because that's what he has promised: "For those who love God all things work together for good" (Romans 8:28). Our problem is that we forget what the "good" is. One of the greatest errors of the contemporary Church is the idea that God's will for us is to be happy, healthy, and wealthy. It can only explain troubles, trials, tribulation, and opposition as a lack of faith. The Church has forgotten that "good" is not what makes us comfortable, but what grows our faith and brings us into conformity with Jesus. This is what Isaac Williams had to say about troubles in the life of the Christian: "Trouble does not spring from the ground; there is some object and good purpose for the troubles which are planted so thick like thorns around our dwelling-places on earth. The reason is this: that such may be made subjects and occasions of prayer to God: God would have us at all times looking to Him; our faces always turned, not like the beasts to the ground, but towards Heaven. And if any one wishes to know on any occasion why this or that little matter of trouble occurs to him,—some difficulty perhaps, some regret, some ill treatment, some loss or reproach, or bodily pain,—of this he may be assured, that it comes to him

from God, in order to induce him to pray. If we had nothing to trouble us, we should have nothing to desire; and if we had nothing to desire, we should have nothing to pray for. It is prayer which hallows all the lesser concerns and accidents of life.”

Consider that St. Paul had what he called a thorn in his flesh. We don’t know what it was. Some say it was a physical handicap or injury, some that it was some sin that persistently tempted him, but whatever it was, he prayed repeatedly that God would take it away, because it pained him and because he felt that it interfered with his ministry. But God chose not to take it away, and Paul testifies to us that the thorn in his flesh, through prayer, became an abundant occasion of grace—even to the point that he no longer wanted it gone. In fact, this brings us full-circle: Paul learned to *rejoice* in his affliction, because it taught him to trust in God. He could proclaim: “When I am weak, then I am strong!” Not because the thorn made him strong, but because it taught him to lean on and draw from the divine strength of God through his gracious, indwelling Holy Spirit.

Do you have a thorn in your flesh? Is there something in your life that causes you pain, that makes life difficult, that makes for a daily struggle? Something you’ve prayed for God to take away? A situation you’ve prayed for God to change? And he hasn’t? I’ve learned that too many people become angry with God in those situations. They blame God for the problem or they complain that he isn’t treating them fairly. Brothers and Sisters, those thorns in the flesh are our *opportunities* to lean on God, not to get angry with him. He offers them to us as occasions to experience the abundance of his grace. Again, God’s will for us is not for life here to be easy and comfortable. We forget that God’s ultimate purpose is to make us holy and to prepare us for life in his presence. It’s far more important to

God that you learn to live in his grace and to trust in him, than that your life be easy or comfortable. And as we can see from the example of Israel in the Old Testament, he often uses difficulties in this life in order to prepare us for life in his kingdom. Again, it’s about our perspective. God wants to give us eternal perspective and to focus our eyes on the things of the age to come, but to do that he often has to take away the things of the present age—the things we won’t otherwise let go of. Friends, when he does that, it’s not because he likes to see us in pain or because he isn’t fair, it’s because he loves us and is graciously drawing our attention to himself and teaching us to live in him. As the writer of Proverbs says, “My son, do not despise the LORD’s discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the LORD reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.” Instead of being the cause of discouragement, our trials should be a sign that God loves us, that we truly are his children, and that he is at work. As Paul’s thorn in the flesh was to him, our trials should grow our faith and build our hope as we experience the grace of God.

That’s when our supplications—those prayers for him to deal with the hard things in life—turn into the thanksgivings that Paul mentions in verse 6. When our prayers for relief turn into thanksgiving for the source of our suffering, that’s when we know we’re on the right track; that’s when we know our eyes are focused on Jesus and that we’re prepared for Jesus’ Second Advent.

The promise that follows if we will truly trust in God is in verse 7:

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

This is the peace that Jesus told his disciples about in John 14:27: “Peace I

leave with you; *my peace* I give to you. *Not as the world gives* do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.” Let me say two things about the peace of the Lord and how it fits in with this Sunday of preparation. First, the more we learn to experience and live in the peace of the Lord, the better we’ll be prepared for Jesus’ kingdom. The peace of the Lord is truly a foretaste of the life he’s preparing for us. But as we live out the peace of the Lord, we witness that future age in the here and now. We display before the anxious and worried eyes of this fallen and corrupt world what it means to have hope and to have faith and to trust in Jesus. Think about that. We greet each other on Sunday mornings with those words: “The peace of the Lord be with you.” Those are powerful words, but I’m not sure we realise that. It’s not just a churchy way of saying “Hi” or “Good morning.” In fact, it’s not so much a greeting as it is a blessing and an exhibition of our love for our brothers and sisters that we wish for them to experience “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding.”

And in the second half of the promise, St. Paul tells us that God’s peace will “guard” our hearts and minds in Christ. That word “guard” is a strong one. In other places it’s used to describe a watchman guarding a city or a fortress from enemies, or a prison guard guarding a prisoner. If we will trust in God—if we will rest secure in Jesus—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, this is what Christmas is all about—it’s joy in the knowledge that Our Lord and King is with us. It’s not just a sentimental joy. It’s a deep and abiding joy that drive us and gives us purpose. It’s a joy that motivates us to grow in the new life

we find in the manger and at the cross, that we might be prepared for Jesus' return. Jesus is with us. He's fulfilled the Lord's promise to pour out his Spirit so that our hearts of stone will be made hearts of flesh—to change the desires of our hearts from self to God. Let the Spirit work in your heart. And not just that, but actively cultivate the fruit of the Spirit as he sets your eyes on Jesus and his kingdom. Let go the things of this age that you might take hold of Jesus and the age to come with both hands.

Adam and Eve's sin was in taking God's role on themselves. Instead of trusting that he knew what was best for them, they decided to make that call for themselves. Human beings have been repeating that mistake ever since. Brothers and sisters, that's something God didn't design us to do. Our understanding, our knowledge, and our perspective are limited. Too often, though, we continue to live like Adam and Eve. We still fail to trust that God knows what's best for us. We're convinced that there's nothing better than the cookies clenched tightly in our fist. We can't imagine anything better. We refuse to listen as God gently urges us to let go. We refuse to trust that he's got something better for us. C. S. Lewis famously wrote:

“If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Dear friends, let go. Let go of the cookies. Get up from your mud pies. God will do whatever it takes to get us

to let go. Don't be like Israel. God eventually had to take literally everything away from his people, sending them into exile, to get their attention and to teach them to trust him. Even then, when Jesus came, most of them refused to let go that they might take hold of his grace.

The sooner we learn to let go of the things of this age, the sooner God will place in our hands the things of the next. And the more often we trust and obey—the better we learn that lesson—the more we will find ourselves rejoicing with St. Paul as we grow and flourish in the grace of God, singing, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” This is why we pray today, “Lord, come among us, we pray, with your power and help us with your great might so that, although we are hindered by our sins and wickedness from running the race set before us, your bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us through the work of your Son our Lord to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be honour and glory now and for ever. Amen.”