



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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A Sermon for the Fourth Sunday in Advent Philippians 4:4-7 & St. John 1:19-28 Fr. William Klock

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“Rejoice!” says St. Paul in our Epistle, “Rejoice in the Lord.” That’s probably the most challenging thing anyone could have said to me this week. I’m struggling to rejoice right now. Three weeks of church closures was already weighing on me and, I’m sure on you too. When I heard the announcement that we’d be shut down at least until the second week in January, my heart sank even lower. It’s not just the closure itself. It’s knowing that the need for pastoral support is going to be greater now than it was in the Spring and that I gave everything I had back then and have been running on empty ever since. I’m just putting one foot in front of the other, pastorally speaking. I expect most of you can relate in some way to that. But Paul is right. Rejoicing in the Lord is important. But maybe not right now. And yet Paul goes on: “Rejoice in the Lord *always*” and as if that wasn’t strong enough, he repeats it: “again I will say, rejoice.” Always. Just do it.

Rejoice. That means to be joyful. It might help us to know that Paul isn’t just talking about being generally cheerful and upbeat. He’s not saying that we need to be slap-happy or that we need to put on a fake smile for others to see. He’s talking very specifically about finding joy in the Lord and in his promises and in the life he’s given us as his people. And he’s talking about showing it—witnessing it so that other people see it. We talked these last few Advent weeks about the Gentiles being drawn to the God of Israel to give him glory, because they’ve seen his faithfulness to his own people. That kind of captures the idea here. Be joyful in the Lord and in a way that attracts the

attention of the world, that they might be drawn to the Lord too.

But boy does that seem hard to do right now. Even when we make a conscious choice, it’s a struggle. But, Brothers and Sisters, this is where Advent leads us. Even as the days get shorter and shorter and lead us into the depths of winter, there in the darkness we’re met by the word become flesh, by the light in the darkness, by the light that the darkness cannot overcome. It doesn’t mean the darkness isn’t real. It does mean that in the midst of the darkness, we have the light of Jesus. As the Psalmist wrote, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me.” If the Psalmist could say that, living in a day that still looked forward to the Messiah and that still looked forward to the gift of God’s Spirit, if a man who knew only the promises and the Lord’s faithfulness could write such words, how much more ought we be able to live them as people of Jesus and the Spirit?

Is it hard? Yes, sometimes it is. Now is one of those times for many of us. And I think it’s even harder when we feel as though we’ve somehow got to gin up these feelings of joy for ourselves. But that’s not what Paul tells us to do. Our joy is rooted in the story of God and his people and that’s an integral part of our Advent readings from Scripture. We should know joy, because we know the story that has brought us to the point we’re at. To that end, let’s look at our Gospel today. Again, it’s found in John 1 and begins at verse 19:

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, “I am not the Christ.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet?” And he answered, “No.” So they said to him, “Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’

as the prophet Isaiah said.” (John 1:19-28)

John the Evangelist introduces us to John the Baptist. As we see in the next paragraph, these Levitical and priestly inquirers were sent by the Pharisees. If someone showed up with a message from God, the Pharisees were sure to show up and to ask questions to see if it was legit. The Jews really were expecting someone. John anticipates this in his answers. They ask who he thinks he is and the first thing he says is, “I am not the Christ.” “Christ” is just the Greek word for Messiah. “I am *not* the Messiah.” That’s the one everyone was really anxious to see. The Messiah would deliver his people and reign as David once had. There had been others in recent memory who had claimed to be the Messiah, and in light of that, the Pharisees probably expected John would do the same. And John says that, no, that’s not him.

“Well, then,” they ask, “who are you?” John first denies that he’s Elijah and then he denies that he’s “the prophet”. What’s that about. Well, first, Malachi had prophesied that Elijah, Israel’s greatest prophet—after Moses, that is—would return one day. This is what he wrote:

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. (Malachi 4:5)

We have a pretty good sense, based on the literature of the time, that a lot of people interpreted this to mean that Elijah himself would literally return in the flesh. Sort of like a King Arthur to return to rescue Britain at its darkest hour. Some people connected this Elijah Redivivus with the coming of the Messiah. Considering that Elijah, rather than dying like everyone else, was swept up by a fiery chariot into heaven, it’s not surprising that people would take Malachi this way. I think this sort of literal fulfilment of the prophecy is why John denied that he was Elijah. In contrast, in last week’s Gospel, we saw Jesus affirm that John was indeed the one to come in fulfilment of Malachi’s prophecy. Maybe John was just exceedingly humble, maybe it never occurred to him that he was, indeed,

fulfilling Malachi's prophecy, but it may have been that he knew he wasn't literally Elijah returned as many expected.

He denies, too, that he's "the prophet". This is a reference to a passage in Deuteronomy 18 in which the Lord promises that he will one day raise up a prophet like Moses, who will declare the Lord's own words. Like the Elijah who was to come, many associated the prophet with the Messiah. "Nope," John says, "that's not me either." But here's the point. Even if they were wrong about who the Messiah would be and when and how he would come, the Jews were living in hopeful expectation of the Messiah. They were in their own Advent. The days were dark. They were supposed to be the people who lived with the Lord in their midst, but his presence had been gone for five hundred years. They'd returned from exile, but without the Lord's presence and with foreign pagans ruling over them, they might as well have still been in exile. They longed for the light to dawn in the darkness and they trusted it would happen, because they knew their story. They knew that the Lord is faithful to fulfil his promises. They belonged to him. Just as he'd once rescued them from Pharaoh, he would rescue them from Caesar.

John was sure of all this, too. He may have denied that he was the one prophesied to come like Elijah or Moses—and it's worth noting that in Matthew and Mark, Jesus actually did affirm that John had come in fulfilment of the Elijah prophecy—but John knew the story, too, and he knew his place in it. When the Pharisees finally let John speak for himself, he told them: "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" He quotes straight from Isaiah 40:3. I think this gets at the reason John answered "No" to the questions about Elijah and the Prophet, but given the chance to identify himself, he looks back to this prophecy of Isaiah. This passage from Isaiah is just as Messianic, but John saw the heart of his role and his ministry here. And while there were people who confused the one

coming like Elijah or Moses with the Messiah, this voice crying in the wilderness is clearly the Messiah's forerunner—or at least that's how John saw it. He was not the Messiah. He was the one sent ahead to prepare Israel to receive the Messiah.

The question they pose about baptism gives him a chance to expand on this. This was one of the perplexing things to the Pharisees. Baptism wasn't part of what they were expecting. Look at 25-27:

They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

Now, baptism *did* have place in Jewish life. Think back to our study of Exodus and the passages about purity and cleansing—washing with water, and all that. Baptism was a symbol of cleansing, of ritual purity. At this point the other gospel-writers are helpful as they expand on John's answer. Mark tells us that his was a baptism of repentance—it was a preparatory act in light of the coming judgement the Messiah would bring. And Matthew and Luke also report John continuing about this one who will come, this one greater than John: "He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16). In other words, John is calling Israel to repentance in anticipation of the Messiah, who will fulfil the Lord's promises to set Israel to rights by filling his people with his own Spirit. The law written on stone tablets would finally be inscribed on the hearts of God's people that they might fulfil his law of love. But the Messiah was also coming in judgement. He would baptise the repentant with God's own Spirit, but he would baptise unrepentant Israel with fire.

These are the two sides of the gospel coin: Jesus advent brought mercy to the repentant, but it also brought judgement

on the unrepentant within Israel. What's significant for us here, Brothers and Sisters, is that this exchange between John and the Pharisees reminds us of the Messiah's place in Israel's story and of the faithfulness of God to his promises. It is this manifestation of the Lord's faithfulness (and of his goodness, mercy, grace, and wisdom) to Israel—something we see brought to its climax in the coming, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of Jesus, that has drawn us to the God of Israel and that, by faith, has incorporated us into the people of God. Through our incorporation into this people, through our being made adopted sons and daughters of Abraham, we've come to know God's mercy and the life of the Spirit, too. And this is where our Epistle today takes off. There are practical implications of our being incorporated into the story of the people of God.

So back to St. Paul's exhortation to the Philippians to rejoice and to rejoice always. What specifically prompted Paul to write this? Well, just two verses earlier, Paul exhorted two women, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree with each other. They had once been fellow labourers with Paul, but had apparently had some kind of dispute or falling out. In response, he calls the Philippian Christian to rejoice in the Lord. Instead of a public display of disunity or resentment or anger—whatever it was that was going on between these two women, the Church was to put on display joy, to celebrate the life of God. Paul then writes:

Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. (Philippians 4:5a)

The King James says, "Let your *moderation* be known unto all men." "Moderation" or "reasonableness" aren't really very helpful translations. Paul uses the same word in 2 Corinthians 10 to describe the meekness of Jesus as a model for Christians. What Paul's getting at there is that Jesus is the King. The gospel reveals and proclaims him in all his divine majesty. And yet it also reveals his gentleness. And it's not just gentleness. It's the sort of gentleness

that only the one who is truly the Lord of the cosmos can show. This is the gentleness we see revealed as Jesus, the one to whom heaven and earth belong, humbles himself to be born one of us, to die on the cross, and to show mercy to his enemies. This kind of meekness or gentleness is unique to Jesus, and yet Paul stresses that as his people, as stewards of the gospel, we're called to witness this same gentleness. As it should be the resolution to so many disputes in the Church, it was the resolution to whatever had driven Euodia and Syntyche apart.

Brothers and Sisters, when we demand our rights, when we grasp for power, when we nurse grudges, we undermine our witness to the world. In contrast Paul calls us to rejoice in the Lord and to manifest Christlike gentleness in our relationships. Remember, as people whom God has graciously and mercifully restored to himself, we ought to witness that in our own joyful unity in Jesus. Consider that every time we hold a grudge, allow a relationship to break down, or follow the world's advice to cut those problem or negative people out of our lives, we undermine the Church's witness to the world. But that's not all. Paul goes on:

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

There's that Advent theme again: Jesus has given us a job to do. He's given us treasure to steward in his absence. In the meantime, rather than being anxious, we should take our needs to God. Jesus made the same point in the Sermon on the Mount. The pagans worry about what they'll eat, what they'll wear, and where they'll sleep. God's people should know better than to worry unduly about these things. God will provide just as he always has. He is faithful to his promises and the story of his dealings with Israel are the proof. So go to the Lord with your needs and ask. And while you're at it, give thanks, because you know his faithfulness and his love.

This is part of the witness of the people of God, too, and it ties back into rejoicing. When Paul talks about rejoicing, at least part of what he's got in mind is a public display or a public witness. The pagan Greeks in Philippi regularly held public celebrations to honour their gods. In the decades before Paul wrote, new rites to honour and to celebrate—to rejoice in—Caesar had been introduced and embraced by the people. And yet the pagans, as Jesus said, were always anxious. Why? Because their gods never delivered. Pagan religion was a non-stop game of trial and error, trying to guess what the gods wanted, trying to guess what you may have done wrong to offend them, and then guessing at what you might offer to appease their anger or to ingratiate them to you in order to get what you needed or wanted. The pagan gods were silent and they were notoriously capricious and unreliable. And in this context Paul exhorts the Philippian Christians: Rejoice yourselves. Let the pagans see you celebrating the fact that Creator of the universe has, through Jesus, made you his own and lives in your midst by his own Holy Spirit. Let the pagans, who know only mean and capricious gods and who live in a dog-eat-dog world, let them see the gentleness of God in you. Live in such a way that they see in you the God who humbles himself to die for the sake of his enemies. And let the pagans see you living in faith, praying in confident thankfulness to the God whose story reveals an unfailing pattern of promise and fulfilment. And the result of all this? Look at verse 7:

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

I think we tend to look at Paul's exhortation here as something we should in order to experience the peace of God ourselves, but given the context in Philippians, I think Paul's point is actually more about our witness. If we truly live as stewards of the good news about Jesus, if we truly live as people who know the faithfulness of God

revealed in Jesus and particularly in his death and resurrection, the peace of God—rather than the strife and anxiety of the world—will guard our hearts and minds in a way that will astound the pagans around us.

I said last Sunday that we are called both to proclaim and to live the gospel. This that living it, right here. And coupled with our proclamation, to truly live in light of Jesus and what he reveals about God, should cause the world to stand up and take note. It will result in many giving glory to God for his faithfulness and then coming to him in faith as we have. And it will threaten many who are invested in the pagan and fallen systems of the world. Like John the Baptist, we are a voice in the wilderness. The difference is that Jesus has now been enthroned as Lord.

I was thinking about this the last couple of weeks. The government has ordered churches closed and it's got a lot of people talking about persecution. Brothers and Sisters, I really think we're dealing with something worse than persecution. Here's what I mean. Persecution happens when people fear the Church and fear our witness. Last week I mentioned Rod Dreher's new book, *Live Not by Lies*. In that book he talks about his conversations with people who lived under Communism in Eastern Europe. The Soviets clamped down on Christians because they understood that the gospel, that the message that Jesus is Lord was a threat to their atheistic philosophy. And it wasn't theoretical. It was often Christians who took a stand against the Communists and they did so in light of the gospel. And they were persecuted horribly for their stand for Jesus.

Brothers and Sisters, that's not what we're seeing, at least not here in Canada or in British Columbia today. Again, I think what we're seeing is something far worse than persecution. What we're seeing today is indifference to the Church. We haven't been barred from public worship because our worship poses a threat to the government. No, we've been shuttered because the authorities see no value in what we do.

They aren't hostile. They're indifferent. Listen to the Health Minister or the Provincial Health Officer and they talk about us as if we're little more than a hobby or a support group—and if that's all we are, then we can put what we do on pause or we can do it over Zoom. Leaders in previous generations, in the midst of national crises, called the Church to prayer. They understood the value of God's people gathered together to pray for the community, the nation, and the world. But not anymore. Even as the authorities restrict us to praying in our homes, I have yet to hear any of them appeal to us to pray for them and to pray for our community and country. I don't think it occurs to them that prayer is important or makes a difference. And we really have ourselves to blame. Why? Because we have not been the witnesses God calls us to be. We have been mealy-mouthed and, quite often, just plain silent in our proclamation and because we have been half-hearted and unfaithful in our gospel living. Like old Israel, we pray to God, but we've failed to tear down the old altars to Mammon and Aphrodite and Caesar. We name Jesus, but we deal dishonestly in business, we sell our souls to the commercialism that surrounds us, we look to politics (or in the immediate situation to science) as our saviour, and we dabble in the sexual immorality of the age. We've failed to proclaim the gospel and we justify saying that we'll preach it with our lives, but if we stop to ask what the world sees in our lives, is it really very different? Does the world see us rejoicing in the Lord? Does the world see us manifesting the merciful gentleness of Jesus? Does the world see us living in faithful prayer and trusting in God, or does it see people just as anxious as everyone else? Does the world see the peace of God ruling our hearts and minds? Sadly, I think that for the Church at large, the answer more often than not is "no".

And when we do proclaim the gospel, we do so without power or authority. As Tom Wright has said, we preach the gospel as good advice, rather than as the good news that it is. Friends, the gospel is the royal summons to submit in faith

to Jesus, who is the world's true Lord—the Lord who has come with mercy so that the repentant will escape when he comes one day in judgement. This was the power behind John the Baptist' preaching. But all too often we present the gospel as just another option on the religious smorgasmord—something you might want to try. See if you like it. See if it works for you. Brothers and Sisters, that's not the gospel. The gospel is good news to the poor: the king who will set the world to rights has come. And that means the gospel, when preached as it should be, will challenge and upset the Herods of our age and all those invested in the false gods of the world.

Brothers and Sisters, we've so failed at being stewards of the gospel that we're provoking neither response: either hostility and persecution on the one hand, or a harvest of new believers attracted to our faithful preaching and living. I pray that the shuttering of our churches would prompt us consider why we're no longer seen as relevant, when in past generations our gatherings for prayer would not only be welcomed, but encouraged. I pray that our situation today would take us to our knees in repentant prayer. That it would remind us of our need for faithful boldness as stewards of the gospel. Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say rejoice.

Let's 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.*