

Advent III (Year C / RCL)  
December 13, 2009

St. Margaret's  
Annapolis

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. *Amen.*

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

It is the Third Sunday of Advent, and every year the readings for this Sunday include a gospel reading about John the Baptist -- his fiery prediction of the coming of the Messiah -- and one of the so-called "rejoice" passages from the Epistles. This year it is this incredible reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians. "Rejoice... Do not worry about anything."

It's an odd combination, isn't it -- "do not worry about anything" in one reading and "the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" in the next.

But then Advent is an odd season; a time of waiting and expectation, even a penitential season, while simultaneously preparing to celebrate the birth of Christ with festivities and gift giving. So it shouldn't be much of a surprise that right in the heart of it all, we get what is known as "Rejoice Sunday," symbolized by the pink candle in the Advent Wreath.

Actually, such combinations and seeming paradoxes are not unfamiliar to the human condition. And never more so than this time of year. Everything around us says that this is supposed to be the happiest time of the year, and in many ways it is. But it is also the most stressful.

The psychologist who developed the Stress Scale -- that method of assigning numerical value to stress-producing events like a job change, moving, a major loss -- he assigned a whopping 14 points for just an ordinary Christmas in this culture.

- There is a greater incidence of relapse among people with addictions;
- a higher number of suicides;
- greater loneliness and depression;
- and more accidents and illness.

At the same time, Christmas often rekindles wonderful, warm memories: the year my little sister and I got matching cowgirl outfits; the year my mom and dad bought me the English saddle I had been saving for; the Christmas I held my newborn baby. The human condition is one in which we are subject to contradictory feelings. Each and every one of us has our story; our sources of stress; the mixed emotions of happiness and sadness.

To this human condition comes Paul's message: "REJOICE... AGAIN I WILL SAY, REJOICE. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not

worry about anything..." It's enough to make one wonder if Paul is some sort of pre-Freudian nut case advocating an unhealthy suppression of feelings. Or if he's like one of those pie-in-the-sky types who tell us, 'Don't worry, be happy,'... 'just give it all to Jesus.'

But Paul is no nut case. Nor is he a pie-in-the-sky type. In fact, he's a very sophisticated, well educated realist. Jewish born, yet trained in Greek. He's a Roman citizen, and an expert on the Talmud. Not only that, but he was in jail when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. He was in jail and had just learned that his favorite church is in a mess. In the face of all that, he wrote this message: "Rejoice...."

He could write that because he knew the very important difference between *feeling* happy and having joy. Happiness is a feeling, a human emotion. And like all human emotions, it is not particularly subject to our control.

Joy, however, is another matter. It's not so much a feeling as it is a condition -- a state of being that transcends ordinary emotions. So Paul is able to say to people he loves -- people who are under duress and who are suffering and struggling: Rejoice! Because he understood that JOY is something we can claim without repressing our feelings, without denying reality, without faking it.

No matter what our circumstances, no matter what the situation, we can rejoice because God is with us. "Do not worry about anything," he says, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

This is not because God does not already know our circumstances or know our hearts, but because it is in prayer -- in turning to God -- that we are open to God's spirit. And when that happens, Paul says, we experience an amazing peace -- one that passes all understanding.

Sometimes, all this has to do with how we see things.

Steven Covey, the author of the best selling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, tells of an experience he had on a New York subway one Sunday afternoon. He says people were sitting quietly. Some were reading newspapers, some were dozing, others were simply contemplating with their eyes closed. It was a rather peaceful, calm scene.

Then at one stop, a man and his children got on the subway train. The children were soon yelling, throwing things, even grabbing people's newspapers. It was all very disturbing, and yet the father just sat there next to them and did nothing. It was not difficult to feel irritated.

Steven could not believe the man could be so insensitive as to let his children run wild and do nothing about it. It was easy to see that everyone else was annoyed as well.

So finally, with what he thought was admirable restraint and patience, Steve said to the man, "Sir, your children are really disturbing a lot of people. I wonder if you couldn't control them a little bit more?" The man lifted his gaze as if coming into

consciousness for the first time and said, "Oh, you're right. I guess I should do something about it. We just came from the hospital where their mother died about an hour ago. I don't know what to think, and I guess they don't know how to handle it either."

Steven says, "Can you imagine what I felt at that moment? Suddenly I saw things differently. Because I saw differently, I felt differently. My heart was filled with this man's pain. Feelings of compassion and sympathy flowed freely, "Oh, I'm so sorry! Tell me about it. What can I do to help?"

Nothing changed in the subway car, he says. All was the same: the same people, the same irritation, the same kids. What did change was his way of seeing it all....

Paul says: take everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving to God. We can, of course, take every thing to God in prayer. Like this anonymous prayer:

I asked God to take away my pride.  
And God said no.  
God said it was not for him to take it away  
But for me to give it up.

I asked God to grant me patience.  
And God said no.  
Patience is a by-product of tribulation.  
It isn't granted. It's earned.

I asked God to spare me pain.  
And God said no.  
Suffering draws you apart  
And brings you closer to God.

I asked God to give me happiness.  
And God said no.  
God gives joy.  
Happiness comes and goes.  
I asked God to help me love  
God said, "Ah, at last. You finally have the idea."

We all have our story; our situation. And no matter what that story is, no matter what our situation, we are invited to rejoice! God is very near. It is not necessary for us to worry. When we open ourselves to God in prayer, we will open ourselves to an unsurpassing peace.

May this peace be yours...and mine in this Advent Season and on this Rejoice Sunday!

Amen.

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