

October 25, 2020 - Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost
Christ the Rock Lutheran Church

Philippians 4:4-13

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

⁸ Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

¹⁰ I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. ¹² I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. ¹³ I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

About ten years before the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christian church in the city of Philippi, Paul had spent a night in jail there. The jailer had stood watch over his prisoners, including Paul and Silas.

Now when Paul writes his letter, he is probably in Rome, a much bigger city nearly 800 hundred miles to the west. Again, a guard is watching over him. Paul is chained in a home waiting for a decision from the Roman government, a decision that he hopes will result in his being released. Paul had been imprisoned and taken to Rome because he was preaching the good news about Jesus Christ.

Someone much greater than a Roman guard is watching over Paul. It is the Lord God himself, and so he writes to the Christians in Philippi that “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). **God will watch over you**, Paul promises his readers. That promise remains good for you today, even as it held true for Paul and the first Christians who read his letter in Philippi.

He Will Give You Joy

Paul and the Philippian Christians could have been unhappy, fearful and angry. You can see that in the movie, “To the Ends of the Earth.” It shows what Philippi would have been like and what the Apostle Paul and those first Christians faced during his mission journeys. A girl was possessed by a demon and abused by slave masters to earn money by predicting the future. When Paul cast out the demon and freed the girl, the slave masters became angry and cruelly attacked him. Like Pontius Pilate at Jesus’ trial corrupt government officials were more interested in keeping slave owners happy than defending innocent men, so they had Paul and his coworker Silas whipped and thrown in jail.

God miraculously caused an earthquake to throw the jail doors open and release Paul and Silas from their chains. The jailer and his family became part of that new Christian church in Philippi.

Now perhaps ten years later Paul is writing a letter to that congregation. Paul has been treated unjustly yet again by corrupt government officials who again, acted like Pontius Pilate. After a dangerous trip on a small boat across a stormy sea that resulted in shipwreck, Paul reached Rome. He was under house arrest awaiting another trial by more corrupt officials. Paul expects to be freed; his death sentence about which we spoke last week would occur some years later after yet another imprisonment in Rome.

Paul could have been angry. He could have written about corrupt officials, hateful people and awful hardships. Instead he tells his readers to rejoice throughout his letter.

We have reasons to be fearful and resentful. Large portions of the media, the entertainment world, educational institutions and even the government itself are hostile to the faith, religion and life of Christians. We could fight back with angry words and even threaten violence when in some areas of the country churches are closed, while large businesses are open, and demonstrations are permitted and sometimes even encouraged. We could complain that God seems to have forgotten us, if the pandemic has caused sickness or even death among people who are close to us. We could question God's love when jobs are lost. We could resort to alcohol or drugs to deaden anxiety or pass the time when regulations isolate us in our homes.

Paul says, none of that. "Rejoice," he says. And to make it crystal clear he says, "I say again rejoice!"

Why? Because the "Lord is near" (v. 4). God is not some distant, uncaring force that has no interest or impact on your life. He loves you. He sent his eternal Son, who is himself God even as the Father is God, to become one of us. He lived among us; he was conceived of the Virgin Mary and survived birth in a barn with a feeding trough for a bed and rags for diapers. His earthly parents fled to Egypt to protect him from a hostile king intent on destroying him. He grew up in Nazareth, where he learned the trade of his legal father, Joseph. He walked the trails of Galilee, Samaria and Judea to call people to repentance and faith in him as the promised Savior. He had no home, no earthly wealth. He endured all this obeying his heavenly Father's will perfectly, so that his obedience would cover your disobedience.

He went to Jerusalem knowing that the religious leaders hated him and plotted his death. He stood before corrupt and unjust leaders and allowed himself to be beaten, whipped and nailed to a cross. He did this for you; he did this to give his innocent life as a perfect sacrifice for your sins. Jesus broke down the barrier of sin that separated you from God. You were baptized. God placed his name on you. He washed away your sins. He made you his child. God is near.

Our lives are full of disappointment, danger and hardship. As we grow old, we realize how quickly the years pass by. The Lord is near. Because Jesus lives, we shall live also. The Lord is near. He will end this present world on the Last Day and create a new heaven and a new earth. Through faith in Jesus Christ we will be with the Lord God forever in heaven.

Therefore rejoice, Paul says; and he explains how to show our joy:

- Be gentle—be patient. Compared to eternity our present suffering is like a blink of an eye.
- Don't worry. Your life is in God's hands. He is near. He will take you to be with him in heaven.
- Pray. Present your concerns and needs to your heavenly Father. He is near. He hears your prayers. He promises to answer them in the way that best serves you and your fellow Christians.
- Giving thanks as you pray and recall how God has watched over you. Not every disaster you feared in fact happened. God has brought good out of what seemed unbearable at the time. You can even face death knowing that in Christ death means falling asleep to awaken in heaven.
- Think about what is true, noble and good. If the news is depressing, open your Bible and read Paul's letter to the Philippians. If television and movies lead to sinful thoughts, open your Bible and read Psalm 119. If family members and friends make you anxious, open your Bible and read Psalm 23. The Lord is near. He speaks to you in his Word, the Bible.

He Will Make You Content

Since he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior, the Apostle Paul's life has been a rollercoaster. He grown in his understanding of the good news of salvation through faith alone in Christ alone. He has seen congregations like the one in Antioch form and flourish. He has found in Christ brothers, sisters and children who became his dearest companions—brothers like Barnabas, Silas and Luke; spiritual children like young Timothy; sisters like Lydia in Philippi. He has been shipwrecked, beaten, and left for dead. He has known times when he had plenty to eat and fine shelter, in cities like Antioch, Corinth and Philippi. He has known sickness, hunger and cold.

Christians would help when they could, but their help was limited. News traveled slowly by messengers who walked Roman roads and sailed the sea. When the congregation learned about Paul's situation, they sent Epaphroditus to help. At last he had arrived. Maybe he brought a cloak to keep Paul warm, maybe some scrolls, likely some money to purchase food. Paul now acknowledges the gift when he says, "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it" (v 10). Read the rest of this letter to the Philippians and it will be clear to you that Paul is, in fact, talking about some support the congregation had now given him.

Notice Paul's joyful satisfaction for their help, however limited and delayed it may have been. No complaints from him! No words like: "Well finally. I was wondering if anyone really cared. I know you're poor (as Paul had previously indicated in his letters), but, look, this gift just isn't enough. Couldn't you have done a little more?" None of that appears in Paul's letter to his fellow Christians.

Ever feel disappointed about your fellow Christians scattered in congregations around the country? Do you think at times that they could have been a little more patient, that they don't understand how difficult it is to support a church and ministry here in Farmington? Do you wonder if they *really* care? Would you like to complain that they seem a little cold and distant!

"None of that," Paul says in effect. Instead he says, "I am content. I know the secret of being content. I can manage with a lot, and I can manage with a little." What's the secret? "The Lord is near." He hasn't forgotten me. His promises still hold true. If I'm suffering house arrest today and don't know for certain that those government officials will in fact set me free, it will be alright. Because of Jesus my sins are forgiven. I'm going to heaven. Meanwhile, God will give me the strength I need to bear whatever happens today and tomorrow. "I can do all things, enjoy abundance and hardship, through Christ who gives me strength."

That's the secret of contentment. You know that secret, don't you! The Lord is near you even as he was to Paul. Therefore, rejoice. Be content. Be at peace. God is watching over you. Amen.