



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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December 17, 2006
3rd Sunday of Advent
Philippians 4:4-7
Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Zephaniah 3:14-17
Psalm of the Day: Psalms 130
Second Lesson: Philippians 4:4-7
Gospel: Luke 3:7-18

God's Peace Brings Joy

Go back to history class for a minute—I know that might put some of you off, but be patient and bear with me. Go back to history class—didn't you learn something about the history of our country, in the Declaration of Independence, something about inalienable rights, and the pursuit of happiness, right? That is something mankind has always been chasing—the pursuit of happiness. Ever since the fall into sin we seem to chase in all the wrong directions, don't we? We are going to find our happiness if only we get this and if only we get that and it always has to do with something that doesn't have anything necessarily to do with God. We end up chasing after happiness in the bottom of a bottle, the bottom of a glass, or a bottle of pills. We chase after happiness by chasing after something new and exciting like an affair or this or that. Our minds, by our own nature, find happiness in all the wrong places.

That is why we are here this morning, because our God, through the Holy Spirit, reminds us that if you want to find joy, there is a certain place where you can always find it. It is a place where it is vital to find it, especially at this time of year when we are chasing after the ideal holiday celebration that Norman Rockwell would paint and our lives often fall short. We get disappointed when we don't find the happiness we think there should be. So instead of chasing happiness, our God tells us to *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* (Philippians 4:4)—to find joy that is found in the Lord. We can always find joy in the Lord because God's peace brings joy to our lives. That is essential for us to remember. Keep ourselves focused on God's peace that we find from being in the Lord and that will bring us joy as we face our fears and because we are sinners, we are going to have a lot of them. God's peace will bring us joy as we deal with each other. You put two sinners together and that often leads to a lot of joylessness, right? We are both sinners and we are both going to do foolish things at times. That is why rejoicing in the Lord and not in our earthly expectations is so vital.

God's peace brings us joy as we face our fears. When you read this reading from Philippians, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* (Philippians 4:4)—what are we talking about fears for? This guy had no fear in the world. It sounds like he had all five numbers in the Powerball, right? Rejoice in the Lord, things are going great, things are going wonderful—this guy has it made in the shade, right? Do you remember what we talked about last week? Where was Paul when he wrote, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* (Philippians 4:4)? Do you remember? He was under house arrest in Rome. This is one of his prison epistles—one of his prison letters. Here is a guy who is in jail, so to speak, and it is not because he assisted in the murder of Stephen, which he did, but he is in jail because he was proclaiming the gospel of Jesus

Christ and it got him into trouble with the Jews and they plotted and connived and he ended up appealing to Rome and then he was chained to a soldier under house arrest. Does that make any sense at all to you?—to write, *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* (Philippians 4:4)—when you can't get up and go where you want when you want and how you want? That just doesn't make human sense, does it? So it tells us that there is really something going on that is beyond nature—something super natural is what is going on—and that is exactly what Paul tells us, doesn't he? *Rejoice in the Lord* (Philippians 4:4) he says.

If we can just learn to live with those three words—in the Lord—that is where we will find God's peace, right? Instead of this self pity and “why me” that you and I often fall into, Paul says “rejoice” because his eyes are not focused on his situation. His eyes are not focused on his earthly expectations. His eyes are focused on the Lord—who the Lord is and what the Lord had done for him. That is why he can find joy. Not an artificial happiness, not a plastered on smile that isn't genuine, but joy that isn't dependent upon his outward circumstances because his joy is based in the Lord—not on the ups and downs of everyday life. In the Lord we know that we, who should go to hell, are forgiven. In the Lord we know that our God is at our side through it all. In the Lord we know that we have one who loves us like no other person in this world could ever possibly love us and he is the one who had the power to say “let there be” and there was. There is joy in knowing this no matter what our outward circumstances are. It becomes a matter of, are we going to focus on our circumstances or are we going to focus on the Lord? Paul's encouragement to the Philippians, the Holy Spirit's encouragement to you and me is to focus on the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord.

After he tells us that, he begins to show us what that is going to mean in our daily lives. He applies it to something that maybe you can relate to. He says, *Do not be anxious about anything* (Philippians 4:6), because you have joy in the Lord. Anxious here doesn't mean excited and you can't wait for it to get here. Anxious here means anxiety, worry, your stomach is in knots and you are all upset and you are worried about how things are going to go. God has Paul tell you and me not to be anxious about anything.

This time of the year, do you find yourself getting anxious about things in the sense of being worried? You are having the in-laws over for Christmas dinner for the first time and you are wondering how the meal is going to turn out. You are worried about whether they are going to get you exactly what you want or if you are going to get the perfect gift for them. Is my holiday celebration going to go the way I want, or is Uncle Joe going to be an idiot again and everything is going to fall apart?

We can get worried about a lot of silly stuff at this time of the year, can't we? The answer, he says, is don't be anxious, but in the Lord present your requests to God—by prayer and petition, present your requests to God (see Philippians 4:6). That makes sense to us, right? When we are worried about something, take it to God in prayer and say, “Lord, this is worrying me. Lord, this is troubling me. Lord, help me.” That we can relate to, but do you notice how he says to pray?—*by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving* (Philippians 4:6). That doesn't make much sense to us, does it? When I am anxious, when I am worried, the last thing I am thinking about is what I am thankful for. As I am struggling in day-to-day life—thanksgiving—you can't even see it from

where my mind is and where my focus is. That is why God has to have Paul come and grab me by the shoulders and slap me on the side of the face a couple of times and say, “When you are worried, pray, but pray with thanksgiving.” It’s not natural, but think about how much sense this makes. As I am saying, “Lord, here is what is troubling me in my life. Here is what I really want you to do because I think it is going to fix it.” We should pray also thanking him for everything else he has done. Thank him for Christ. Thank him for forgiveness. Thank him for the good gifts he gives us in this lifetime and then pretty soon, as we are praying about all the wonderful things God has done for us in the past, what comes over us?—God’s peace. The God who loved me this way in the past and who has promised to love me this way in the present and in all the future, his peace, which comes from his gospel, begins to take hold. Paul describes that for us. He describes what that peace is like when it takes hold around us. It stands guard at our hearts and our minds (see Philippians 4:7).

It is a beautiful picture—a century, a soldier standing guard, making sure nothing goes against the way that his orders say they should go. But the soldier doing this, it says, is God. It is his peace that stands guard at our hearts. The knowledge that there is peace between us and him, the knowledge that he loved us enough that he stretched out his arms on a cross, the knowledge that he loved us enough that he laid in that stable, the knowledge that he loved us enough that he was perfect and didn’t worry where you and I worry; he was perfect and prayed to his Father perfectly when you and I pray imperfectly, and he did all of that for us and then took all the times that you and I fail to do it and hung on the cross with it so that it would be punished in him and not on us. That peace is what stands guard at our hearts.

There is someone who really doesn’t want it there. Satan doesn’t want us to have this kind of peace. He doesn’t want us to have this kind of confidence in our God. He doesn’t want that standing guard in our hearts so he tries all he can to get us distracted and at this time of the year, he maybe even uses what we view as our Christmas preparations or our Christmas celebrations to lead us away from that peace. We get worried. We get anxious. We have all these other things that trouble us and terrorize us and we focus on them and we forget about that peace that God has for us there. That is probably one of the reasons why at this time of the year the suicide rate goes up, because we have this picture in our mind of what the ideal should be and our experiences are far from it and we despair and we get discouraged. God says, “Quit focusing on that and focus on me and my peace. Focus on the love I have shown you.”

That peace comes to us because of who God is and what he has done for us. That peace then stands guard in our hearts and minds and it comes to us in this unexpected way—the way we would never have guessed—through the son of a Jewish carpenter and God becoming man. But it brings us things that we would never expect. It brings us gifts and blessings that we just wouldn’t imagine. That peace standing guard at our hearts and minds enables us to rejoice when we are in prison, rejoice when we are facing difficulties, and rejoice when we have all kinds of other problems. The world can’t understand that.

A number of years ago I sat with a man for about four hours who was on his death bed. His body had been ravaged by cancer. His stomach was swollen and bloated from all

the tumors in his body. This man spent the afternoon in the peace of God. He apologized to his pastor. He apologized to his nurses. He apologized to his doctors. He apologized to his wife that he was putting them through all of this difficulty. That day he went to sleep in the peace of knowing that he was going to be with his Lord in heaven. The nurses marveled. I heard them talking in the hallway. The doctor even marveled at the confidence this man had and it came because the peace of God was standing guard in his heart and in his mind and that is what he was focused on. As we sang hymns, as we read readings, the love of God in Christ brought him a peace that—like we always say—passes understanding. It was not understood by those people that were seeing it. I understood it, but I still marveled at it, because I know as a sinner I am so tempted to look in other places. I was so thankful that the Lord kept this man's attention focused on his God.

This man's concern for those around him also illustrates something else that God's peace that brings joy does to us. It does what the world so often doesn't value. It makes us concerned about others. God's peace brings us joy as we deal with others. In here God talks about *Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.* (Philippians 4:5). We at times view this gentleness, which really means meekness, consideration of others—there are a whole bunch of things that are pictured in this word; it really pictures your Christ-likeness—Christ who put our interest ahead of his own, Christ who put us first, that kind of gentleness. Willing to endure difficulty for the sake of others—that is what Christ did for us. And that is what God says now. Let that kind of gentleness be evident in your life.

Think about it at this time of the year—you do have those in-laws over. You make turkey or ham or whatever you are making. You labor, you strive and they take their first bite and their nose wrinkles. Is it really easy to let your gentleness be evident to all then? Or is it a lot easier to become bitter and angry and spit and sputter and mutter and think this and think that? The truth of the matter is that I can't control how others are going to react to me, but what I can control is how I react to others. Because Christ has loved me the way he has loved me, because he has taken away my sins, now I want to and I strive to react in a way that pleases God—not that pleases my sinful nature, not that satisfies my desire to get even, but in a way that thanks God that he has given me the gift of heaven.

We strive to be more Christ-like in our daily lives. We strive to let that peace of God not only stand guard at our hearts and minds, but at our words, our thoughts and our actions. We want it standing guard there and controlling what we say and think and do because as we bear the name "Christian," we want to glorify Christ as we live for him. It is not always easy and it doesn't satisfy our sinful nature by any way, shape, or form, but the new self in us that loves God rejoices to let our gentleness be evident to others. We know that the Lord is near in the sense that when he calls us out of this world, these slights, these perceived insults, these perceived things that hurt us are gone forever. We are with the Lord forever. We are rejoicing in his presence. We are living in his glory where there is no more sorrow, no more suffering, no more tears, and no more worrying about how others perceive us. Instead, we are loving and serving one another.

So maybe as we let our gentleness be evident to all, even in the holiday season, we begin to bring a little bit of heaven to earth as we live in a way that glorifies the one who has seen to it that heaven in ours because he gave us this peace that brings us unexpected joy.