

Third Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2009
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Advent 3 - Philippians 4:4-7

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

During my vicar year in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, Lisa and I lived in a one, or I guess really a one and a half, bedroom apartment. The one bedroom was just big enough for a crib, but our eight-month old Katie really did not like to be laid into a crib. So we did something that took a long time to undo - we started to let Katie sleep in the bed with us. So here we were with Lisa on one side, me on the other, and little Katie right in the middle. And she slept like this with her arms and legs completely stretched out. Every night she did something that I will never forget. She used to reach out with her arms to make sure that mom and dad were both right there. First she would reach one way until she touched mom and then she would turn, and I tested her by moving a couple times, and reach until she touched dad. After feeling and making sure we were both there she would give a big smile and sleep.

Two things come to mind when I think about Katie and her reaction at those moments. I think of joy and peace. That little smile was a joyful one. She was happy right where she was - probably cause she had most of the bed. She was at peace. She felt safe & secure because mom and dad were right there. My little baby girl appeared to have joy and peace just in knowing that we were near.

Dear children of God: how much more do we have the blessings of joy and peace knowing that our Lord is near! The Lord is right here to hear us, forgive us, comfort us, strengthen us, and guide us. He is here to bless us and keep us. Our God is always close - in good times and bad. Today, as we focus on these beautiful words in this letter called Philippians let us consider and take comfort in the fact that: **The Lord is near! To fill us with true joy. To grant us true peace.**

Did you listen to the command Paul gives to us and all Christians? ***“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all.”*** We are to be happy and joyful and thankful people. While some days this may be easy, we are not just to rejoice on those days. We are told to rejoice always - everyday and in every circumstance of life. Does this mean that our lives as God’s children will be easy? Not exactly. Remember Paul is in prison in Rome as he writes this letter. Yet, Paul says rejoice. He says to let your gentleness be clear for all to see.

So let us get this straight. We are to rejoice even when we are lying in a hospital bed? We are to be happy even after a fender bender or a root canal or poor grade or a bad hair day? We are to be glad even when we are struggling to pay the bills or get things organized at work? We are to be gentle even when our spouses hurt us or family members frustrate us? We are to find joy in a year where we lost a loved one or a job? We are to rejoice in all circumstances and be gentle in all we do and say?

How can we possibly be happy and joyful all the time? How is one able to rejoice always with all the ups and downs of the roller coaster of life? Did you catch the apostle Paul's key to this rejoicing? It is "***in the Lord...The Lord is near.***" When we are lying in the hospital bed or having a bad day, our Father in heaven is right at hand. When we feel all is lost, when others hurt us, when tears of sorrow fill our eyes, our God remains close by - so close we can call out to Him at anytime and He will hear us. "***Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.***"

This is why we always have a reason to rejoice. We are children of God through faith in Christ Jesus! We have a Father who loves us so much He tells us: "*Don't worry. I am right here for you. Do not be upset or anxious about anything. Take everything to Me and I will take care of it. Cast your burdens on Me because I care for you and I will work out all things. Everything will come out in the end for your good. Just bring your all your requests to Me. And if you want Me to talk to you just open up my Word which I have given you for there I have much to say to you. In My Word you will see how much I love you.*" The Lord is near. He is near to fill our lives with true joy - not just the kind of happiness we may feel on good days - but joy that gives us reason to rejoice always.

The Lord is also near to grant us a blessing that goes way above and beyond what we can comprehend or understand. It is a blessing we all need. It is the blessing of the gospel. The Lord gives us true peace. This is a blessing that is beyond our understanding because there is no way we deserve to be at peace with a holy God. Instead of being near, the Lord should cast us away from His presence. He should because of our sin.

Just look at the last command. Have you rejoiced in every circumstance? Is your gentleness evident to all? If you are a Christian that is always joyful and happy like you should be, if you are one who is always gentle and patient as God wants us to be, then you are the first one I've ever seen. I find gentleness to be lacking this time of year when on the busy roads cars are so eager to get places and people are making mad dashes to find zhu zhu pets or whatever the hot items are this year. It becomes a crazy mad house out and we can get caught up in it. When we don't show others the true joy we have in Christ, when our gentleness is not evident to all, we sin.

Yet, the Lord is near. In fact, our sin is the reason God, Immanuel, needed to become so near that He became human just like us. Jesus came near to bring us the holiness we need by living a perfect life of trust and joy and gentleness. In His great love Jesus reconciled sinners like you and me to God by offering His perfect life on the cross to pay for our worry and lack of gentleness. By His painful suffering and death and His glorious resurrection, Jesus brought us near to God. He grants us peace not just in the fact that we can take all our problems to God and He will now hear us, but peace of knowing that He has actually taken care of the root of all problems - sin. Jesus takes our sin away so that we are at peace with God. He comes near to us - so near that in His Holy Supper He touches us with His own body and blood given and poured out for us to assure us our sins are forgiven. And we can depart in peace.

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." I have never experienced it myself but if you go deep into the center of the ocean the waters lie quiet. There all is still, even though the fierce currents are running and the wild waves are raging above. That is the peace we

have in our hearts as forgiven children of God heading to heaven. In all circumstances of life we are able to enjoy peace. The Lord is near. He grants us true peace - the only peace that counts - the peace that stands guard over our hearts and lives - the peace of the gospel that goes beyond all human understanding - the peace that nothing can ever take from us. This is the peace God sent to us at Christmas when He sent us His only Son.

Again I think of my little Katie just laying there between us with a big smile on her face in joy and peace. That's us dear Christian friends. Put smiles on because the Lord is near. Let your gentleness be evident to all because you can take all your anxiety and in prayer and petition bring it to God. The Lord is near - so you have every reason to feel safe and secure - because you are! You are at peace with God because of Jesus. The Lord is near. He loves you. Listen to the Lord tell you just how much in His Word. The Lord is near to fill you with true joy and grant you true peace. Amen.