

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Advent 1  
November 27, 2022  
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
***Rejoice in the Lord always!***

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 4:4-7

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of the most beautiful paradoxes in the Bible. This letter written to the Philippians is one of Paul's "prison epistles." When he writes this, he is in prison in Rome. He's under house arrest, accompanied constantly by a Roman guard. His future is uncertain. He's waiting to go on trial before Nero Caesar, and he has no idea how the trial is going to turn out. He might be set free, he might be imprisoned for the rest of his natural life, or he might be executed for his faith in Jesus. Under these circumstances Paul writes his letter to the Christians in Philippi, a city in northern Greece, a letter that carries the nickname "Epistle of Joy." The whole letter exudes a spirit of rejoicing, a joy that was undiminished by his difficult circumstances, and that spirit culminates in these verses in chapter 4: *Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! Rejoice!* What is he talking about rejoicing for? How can you rejoice when you're being deprived of liberty, chained up like an animal? No matter where he was at, Paul had learned to be filled with joy.

Christians are joyful people. Paul knew that fact. Paul lived that fact. He knew Jesus is coming. He knew he was going to heaven someday soon. He knew that whatever suffering or adversity he might experience in this life was trivial in comparison to the bliss and glory that was waiting for him with Jesus. His faith and his love for the Lord Jesus Christ who had bought him back from all sin, slavery, death and hell, could not be contained. The joy of God's blessings just had to be celebrated in Paul's life. Paul was a Christian, a disciple of Jesus Christ, a child of God and an heir of eternal life, and because of those facts Paul had to rejoice.

You know what he was writing about because you've experienced the same joy. You know what it means to have the burden of your sins and guilt lifted and taken away. God's Holy Spirit works daily repentance in your heart. You leave your sins at the foot of Jesus' cross, and the Devil's finger-pointing and accusations against you mean nothing. His charges against you can no longer stick. You've been washed and cleansed by the blood of Jesus that was shed for you on the cross. You're going to heaven someday, and it's going to be soon. And you've been given the same Holy Spirit who lives in you. You're a Christian, and Christians are optimists. Christians have a can-do attitude. Christians radiate a naturally positive spirit because Christians have a positive, joyful outlook on life.

Now let me stop here and make something perfectly clear. I've shared with you before that "joy" is not always the same thing as "happiness," and being joyful is not the same as being happy. It is not a sin to cry. It is not a lack of faith when we shed tears at the loss of a loved one, when we experience grief and heartache. I don't expect you to be happy when your boyfriend or girlfriend dumps you, when the boss tells you you've been laid off, when you're the victim of a crime, when your nice car is turned into a crumpled hunk of metal and you barely came through with your life, when you don't get the sale, or even when your favorite team loses the big game. Being a Christian does not mean that you're going to go through life perpetually bubbly and giddy and always on Cloud 9. That's not realistic! There's a reason we refer to this world as a "valley of tears." There's a reason Scripture teaches us that we must through many trials and tribulations enter the kingdom of heaven. Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is not a drug that puts us on a perpetual emotional high. In fact, our emotions can sometimes be more of a roller coaster than anything. Sometimes we're up, sometimes we're down. We're not always going to be flying high and happy.

But we do want to be careful that hard times and adverse circumstances do not rob us of our joy. Now I'm not talking about just tears in difficult times, I'm talking about when we give in to the temptation to become joyless. Why does the apostle have to say to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always?" Because we can become joyless! We can become grumblers and complainers, negative, downcast, worried, anxious. We give a horrible testimony of what it means to be a Christian, so that people even say, "So-and-so is a Christian and is always negative. Why would I ever want to be a Christian if that's what it's like?" You and I have fallen into that sin of joylessness. Maybe lingering health problems have overwhelmed us, maybe we've become so frustrated with the culture around us that we've become perpetually grumpy. The world is against me! Everything is wrong! Our country's going to hell in a handbasket! My lot in life is so terrible. Pity me! Poor, poor me! When we find ourselves falling into that mindset, our perverse, dark mentality gives a

horrible testimony about what it means to be a Christian. Then it's time for me to repent. Then it's time for me to pray, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me" (Psalm 51). In response to that dark spirit Paul says, "*Rejoice in the Lord always!*"

What do you think is the source of this perverse, dark, joyless attitude that sometimes occupies us? It comes from none other than Satan himself, and it's energized by none other than the forces of hell! The Devil wants more than anything to rob you of joy. Think for a moment why he wants to do this: The Devil is a miserable, wretched creature, who lost his place in heaven, and he wants nothing more than for you to share in his wretched misery. Misery loves company!

The Devil wants to strip you of your joy. He wants to take it all away from you. He wants to rob you of the joy of service and sacrifice and obedience to God, and he wants to fill your heart with dark, selfish, joyless, brooding thoughts of bitterness, resentment, spite, malice, anger, hatred. He wants to make you resent who you are and what God has made you. He wants to make you despise your Christianity and see your faith as something repressive. He wants to lead you down the path of sin and shackle you to a lifestyle that is destructive and empty. He wants to saddle you with overwhelming guilt, so that you're consumed by darkness and fall into hopelessness and despair, and you think that God could never love you and the church could never help you, and it's all about your big problems that God just has no way of understanding. The Devil wants to rob you of your joy!

Oh, Satan will tell you that he's interested in your happiness. He's more than happy to peddle false joy—the seductions of sinful pleasure, the "joy" of always being right and never confessing our sins, the perverse joy of delighting in someone else's woes. There's only one word for that kind of false joy that delights in misery: it's Satanic. Just as the Lord calls us to repent of our adulteries, our lusts, our greed and our gossip, he also calls us to repent of our joylessness.

Paul tells us, "*Rejoice in the Lord always.*" He says it so emphatically, that he even repeats it to press home the point: *I will say it again: Rejoice!* Then Paul tells us why: *The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*

Dear friends, is it actually conceivable that the God who planned your soul's salvation; the God who knew you by name before the foundations of the earth were laid; the God who called you by name in Baptism—is it actually possible that the God who walked in your shoes and suffered your sorrows; the God who kept the commandments you have broken and was joyful when you and I were not; God your Father who sacrificed his dearest treasure on the cross of Calvary and raised Jesus again victorious on Easter Sunday—is it conceivable that the God who has solved your greatest problem, that of death and hell and the just condemnation of our sins and has replaced his divine wrath with sublime forgiveness and has substituted our well-deserved condemnation for the gift of eternal life—could he now fail you when you meet with the little obstacles, speed bumps and roadblocks of life? *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* You are safe in Jesus' loving arms. "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

The Devil can succeed in robbing us of joy only when he can get our eyes off Jesus. When he can take our eyes off the cross, when he can make us forget his loving embrace in Holy Communion, and when he can get us to turn our thoughts inward to our own emotions, to our own fears, doubts—and to our own flagging strength—then he can lead us deeper and deeper into the black pit of despair.

Christian joy is rooted in Jesus, and when we find our lives becoming joyless, there's only one solution: return to the source of all joy and gladness. Look outside of yourself. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Not on the news. Not on talk radio. Not on current events. Not on the morning's stiffness and the daily aches and pains. Contemplate *Jesus. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything.* Let a song of praise be found on your lips, and a psalm of joy in your heart. In the joyless moments of life rest your heart in Jesus. This world is a dark place, but we're not citizens of this world, and this world is not our permanent home. Our bodies and lives may suffer from pain and sadness, but this vessel of clay in which we live is not our permanent home. Our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly await a Savior from there, who when he comes again will transform this lowly body to be like his glorious body, make us fit for eternity, and usher us into his joyful presence. This Advent we again focus on the coming of our King. Jesus came once in humility to bear our sins and sorrows, and he will come again soon, and we will greet him with joy that will never end. *Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! Amen.*