



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
Oct. 15, 2023
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "Rejoice?"

Philippians 4:1-9 (NRSV)

4:1 Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

4:2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

4:3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4:4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

4:5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

4:6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

4:7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

4:8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

4:9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Sermon: Rejoice?

Rejoice in the Lord, Always, says Paul. And the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The Peace of God.

Many of you do not know yet how much of a worrier I am. I've been told that I keep a cool, some – in my family – might say aloof front. But, between you and me, when I talk about that worry always at the back of your mind in sermons, I am talking about myself.

An example: I worry about my kids. I recognize that's obvious. Of course, you worry about your kids. I thought that was boring and self-evident too before I had kids, and then my anxiety went through the roof and stayed there. The summer after Joseph was born, I was working at the Center for Teaching at Vanderbilt. Lindsey took several months of maternity leave but eventually went back to work. Joseph was in daycare, and since his daycare was on the way from our home to Vanderbilt, I was the one to drop him off.

I should preface this by saying Joseph didn't sleep through the night for his first 9 months of life. We were tired all the time. I found myself working at the Center for Teaching, and asking myself, did I really drop Joseph off? Did I just dream that I just dropped Joseph off? Because the Center was on campus, I had to park far away and walk. And in the middle of the day, I would walk back and forth, checking the car, making sure Joseph wasn't still in there. I got to where I started taking pictures with my phone, of the empty car-seat. So, when I started to worry if I really dropped Joseph off at daycare, I could look at the picture for reassurance.

I told a friend of mine about this practice. She assured me, don't worry. That will wear off. You won't have to take pictures of empty car seats forever. She was wrong. I still do it. There have been days I have taken pictures of my empty back seat before walking into this church. I can be an anxious person!

There is an every-day-ness of worry. Perhaps you share in this worry in your own way. And then there is this past week, a week full of worry, and anything but peace.

Every day, on the news, unspeakable terror. The Hamas terror attacks on Israel, that left 1,300 dead, break our hearts. Stories of families murdered and kidnapped, as they went about their lives on a Saturday morning, last conversations and texts

between loved ones, images no one should ever have to see, suffering no person should have to experience. The heart breaks.

Then those images are set beside the images of the people in Gaza. Two million people, almost half of them children, packed in a 25-mile stretch of land, one of the most densely packed places on earth, now with no electricity or running water, a medical system on the brink of collapse, overrun by civilian casualties of bombing runs; over 2,000 killed; including 700 children, hundreds of thousands left homeless, and the threat of urban war looming in their midst. The heart breaks.

Here at home, clashing protests for Israel and Palestine, arguments and sometimes fights breaking out into the street. In our own denomination, the Acting Stated Clerk issued a statement about Israel and Gaza, and online, pastors were arguing with one another, with vitriol and sarcasm, over what was said and what was not said, or not said enough in the statement, a microcosm of a divide tearing through this country.

This has been a week of worry.
How has your Spirit faired this week?

And Paul told the church in Philippi,
“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice.”
And I ask, Always? Always?
“Rejoice in the Lord always”

In August of 2020, the Washington Post ran a story entitled, “Time to ditch ‘toxic positivity,’ experts say: ‘It’s okay not to be okay.’”¹ In the height of pandemic uncertainty, the article was responding to the onslaught of non-supportive platitudes circulating around the county.

Things like,

“Everything will be fine.”
“It could be worse.”
“Look on the bright side.”

¹ Allyson Chiu, “Time to ditch ‘toxic positivity,’ experts say: ‘It’s okay not to be okay’” *The Washington Post*. Aug. 19, 2020. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/toxic-positivity-mental-health-covid/2020/08/19/5dff8d16-e0c8-11ea-8181-606e603bb1c4_story.html

The article quotes Dr. Stephanie Preston, professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, who says,

It's a problem when people are forced to seem or be positive in situations where it's not natural or when there's a problem that legitimately needs to be addressed that can't be addressed if you don't deal with the fact that there is distress or need.

In contrast to dealing with what you are experiencing, she says toxic positivity produces what is known as a meta-emotion, meaning an emotional response to your own emotional response. Instead of making you feel happy, toxic positivity produces guilt, because when everyone is telling you to look on the bright side, you feel bad about feeling bad.

“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice,” says Paul. This verse can be misused to promote toxic positivity. But I don't think that is what Paul has in mind with the church in Philippi.

As we have looked at the letter to the Philippians as a whole over these past three weeks, we've seen that Paul does not erase pain with a series of platitudes, but rather sets joy and pain beside one another:

It has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ. Ch. 1. Paul writes from a prison cell.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited... And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death -- even death on a cross. Ch. 2. Paul proclaims a fallen savior.

And this week, I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel. Ch. 4. Paul writes to a divided church.

Joy and pain set beside one another, again and again.

I'll just note here in passing, to all the many preachers who use the Apostle Paul to silence women in church and deny access to the pulpit: right here and in several other places Paul says plainly that women were co-leaders with him in the churches he founded.

“Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say Rejoice,” says Paul.

The word that Paul uses for joy, as in “Rejoice in the Lord always,” appears sixteen times in this letter, often set directly beside remarks about pain,

But even as I am being poured out as a libation...I am glad and rejoice with all of you – and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me. He mentions joy twice in that one sentence. And in that verse, he’s talking about the possibility of dying in prison.

So, there is a wider point in Paul that goes beyond simply, ‘don’t worry, be happy.’ It is more, that in the whole of life, including worry, including pain, we also have joy, because of this assurance:

The assurance that:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. Romans, ch. 14.

That neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.
Romans, ch. 8.

[That] the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.
Philippians, ch. 4.

What Paul offers is much deeper than false positivity. It is the assurance that in every situation in life, we live in and through Christ.

So, no matter the season in life, we are freed, because we know nothing can separate us from God. And therefore, we do not shut out the world and ignore all that troubles it, but rather, we can engage this world more fully, knowing that we do not do so alone, for “The Lord is near.”

This past week, I was looking through some of my old commentaries on Philippians. I noticed that at some point, years ago, I had underlined and marked

up a section of a book on Philippians 4. I didn't remember ever preaching on this text, but after looking through all my old sermons, I found out that, yes, indeed, my second sermon ever at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Asheville, NC was on Philippians 4, verses 1-9. Preached on Oct. 15, 2017. I had entitled it, "The Peace of God." I reread parts of it. It wasn't a very good sermon; I do not recommend it to you.

But it made me think about the countless times, in all the occasions, when these ancient words of Paul have been read, in churches like this, in times like these:

When war has loomed. "Rejoice in the Lord always."

After acts of terror. "Rejoice in the Lord always."

In days of deep communal sadness. "Rejoice in the Lord always."

And in your own lives, how many times have you heard it?

- In uncertain days: A new school, a new town, a new job. a new community:
 - "Rejoice in the Lord always."
- In the great transitions of life. Marriage, divorce, children, loss. In midst of grief:
 - "Rejoice in the Lord always."
- And in the everyday hum of life. The weariness of life. Fatigue, worry, the search, the strain of the everyday:
 - "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Paul's plea for joy. Echoing throughout the years.

And when we hear it, the gospel does not erase our troubles. It is not about a smiling face that denies a world of pain.

It is, rather, a joy, nestled in hope. A hope that in Christ death will not have the final word, and violence does not rule this world, and might will never ultimately make right.

And no matter what may come, a hope that Christ will be a guiding light, and an unshakable assurance. And in the end, these words written by an apostle in his jailcell to a persecuted and divided community will ring as true to us as it did to them.

Rejoice in the Lord always; Rejoice in the Lord always; Rejoice in the Lord
always. Always. The Lord is near.

Amen.