

Philippians 4:4-7: The Lord is Near! By Vicar Andrew Steubs

The day is near. The ax is at the root of the trees. Yes, it is coming soon. Of course I am speaking of Christmas, which as of today, is about a week and a half away. You walk into a shopping center these weeks and you're immediately surrounded by red and green decorations. The words "Peace" and "Joy" are plastered everywhere. But if peace and joy are supposed to encapsulate the theme of Christmas, then how come the days and weeks prior are often just the opposite? Why is the Christmas season the most depressing time of the year for some and a frantic, always-falling-behind chase for many others—with presents to buy, cards to write and activities to attend? If Christmas is all about peace, then where is that peace? Why does it never last longer than the few hours between Christmas Eve night and Christmas Day morning?

As we continue on our journey through advent, do these weeks still carry the same significance for you? Is Christ's coming in humility as the infant Savior of the world still filling you with joyful anticipation? Or has Christmas become another season of frantic worrying, an always-falling-behind chase, or just a sad reminder of the loved ones you no longer share it with? Life on this earth can suck this season of the joy it is meant to bring.

Part I

The Apostle Paul had every reason to feel the same way. He didn't have an easy life by any means. He'd survived shipwrecks, endured scourging and rejection, he was even sitting in a prison cell when he wrote today's words from Philippians. But Paul was also aware of the fast approaching advent of the Lord. And in light of that Paul writes this morning, ***"Rejoice....always! The Lord is near!"***

These words really encapsulate the whole point of advent. ***"The Lord is near,"*** Paul says, reminding us what advent is all about: Jesus coming in humility to the manger in Bethlehem. But Paul's words also point us forward to the day which is quickly approaching when our Lord will return again in judgment.

But does that thought, the idea that Jesus is going to return soon to judge the world, really bring us peace when we consider how short we've have fallen of God's expectations? Yes, and advent reminds us of why. Paul says, ***"Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst."*** Even when the guilt for putting Christians to death crept its way back into Paul's mind, Paul always came back these words: ***"The Lord is near,"*** my guilt has been removed, ***"Rejoice...always!"***

So Christians, does that mean that we should be happy *all the time*? Does Paul want me to ***"rejoice"*** when my bills outnumber my paychecks? When those I love are facing life's sharp edges of sickness and death, does Paul want me to rejoice in that?

He does say ***"Rejoice..always,"*** but how is Advent and the coming Savior suppose to bring me joy when all I'm feeling during this season is loneliness because my spouse of 40 years is gone? How should I stay happy when I'll probably be spending most of the holidays in the hospital? When we approach advent from the perspective of life on earth, ***"rejoice...always,"*** sure doesn't make much sense does it?

Is Paul asking too much of us? We sure can't find peace within ourselves. That kind of peace could never hold up with the anxiety and the troubles we face in this life. Likewise, we can't expect to be happy in every situation of life. God doesn't promise us that.

So is Paul asking too much of us? If it were up to *us* to find our own happiness and joy, then yes, he is. But that's why Paul doesn't say, "Rejoice in yourself, in your life, in your current circumstances, always." No Christians, he says "**Rejoice**," but he adds, "**In the Lord.**"

Paul, from his prison cell in Rome, is giving us a lesson today on true joy. No, it doesn't always seem reasonable to rejoice, especially when we're facing trying and difficult circumstances. But that's why Paul repeats it, "I will say it again, [in the Lord] rejoice!" Outward circumstances have nothing to do with the condition of a believer's heart. Our hardships don't determine how happy we are. Joy is ours regardless of those!

Don't misunderstand Paul. He's not saying "Christians, you need to put on a happy face all the time!" But something much deeper and far more real than that! It is "**In the Lord,**" That we rejoice. We find joy in the oneness that we always have with Christ, as believers. "**In the Lord,**" we have forgiveness and hope in this life. "**In the Lord,**" we have confidence that when he comes again, he is coming not to condemn us, but to take us home with him forever.

When you remember in the midst of life's difficult times, "***the Lord is near,***" then all of a sudden those challenges you face on this earth don't appear as daunting. When you remember "***the Lord is near***" how significant lives of gentle joyfulness become.

And that's how we live like Paul today, dear Christians. "***Let your gentleness be known to all people,***" Paul says. Here's the result of that joy, it shows itself in the gentle way we treat others, in the patience we display to those who wrong us and the love we give unconditionally. When we live "***In the Lord,***" loving our spouses unselfishly and raising our children with gentleness and patience isn't so difficult anymore. A life of Self-sacrifice becomes a joy, because THAT'S HOW JESUS LIVED!

Yes Christians, ***The Lord is near,*** and because he is, we rejoice always.

II

But Paul doesn't stop there this morning. He goes on to tell us, "***Don't be anxious about anything.***" Especially this time of year, that's a difficult thing to do isn't it? We've got gifts to buy, cards to write, services to plan and attend.

But our worries don't end there. Year round we worry about our children and their futures, our neighbors and their opinions of us. We worry whether or not our cars will start on these cold mornings. We worry about school, whether or not our job will last. We worry whether or not we'll have enough to retire or make it through retirement. But Christians, worry isn't just bad for you physically, it's also bad for you spiritually. Worry boils down to a lack of trust in our provider, and that's sin.

When worry clouds your mind, that's when Jesus speaks to you. He points up to the sky and says, "***Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?***" If our Father in heaven makes sure that an ugly crow has enough road-kill to eat, he is certainly going to care for the needs of you, his most precious creation!

Paul is not asking too much of us Christians. *The Lord is near*, and that makes it possible to put Paul's words into practice. Consciousness of our Savior's inevitable return helps us set all of our worries aside. It renews our trust. It reminds us that God isn't going to leave us here in our troubles, but he is going to return and take us home. As John the Baptist proclaimed, "**His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn.**"

But until that day comes, Paul says, "**In all things by prayer and supplication (urgently seeking aid from God,) with thanksgiving, make known your requests to God.**"

How do we overcome worry? Think back to when you were a little child and something was just too big for you to lift, who did you usually ask for help? You went to your parents didn't you? You'd ask, "Dad, I need your help with this, it's too heavy for me to lift, too much for me to carry on my own." And in the same child-like fashion, our all-knowing heavenly Father invites us ask him the same question. "Father I need your help, I can't carry this burden on my own." And he answers our request in his almighty and loving voice, "Dear child, I will take care of these things that weigh heavily on you. 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." Christians, when your burdens have brought you to your knees, set them at the feet of your heavenly father and listen to his answer.

The Lord is near. When we remember that, peace is ours. Paul confirms this when he says, "*The peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" This isn't a wish, but a sure and a certain promise from God himself which he places over all of you, over all your labors and endeavors. It's a peace that *surpasses all understanding*. It's more wonderful than anything you could imagine and beyond every thought you've ever had.

You'll hear these words at the end of today's message, just as you hear them each week. This promise is a final reminder of the peace which guards you as you leave this building today, and enter into the world. Peace in your Savior, the humble baby born in Bethlehem who would one day redeem a world from sin. It's a peace the world cannot offer, peace which cannot be taken away.

Since 1937, a guard has stood at Arlington cemetery watching over the Tomb of the Unknown soldier. The tomb never stands unguarded, soldiers are switched in and out so that every minute of every day that tomb remains guarded. What a great picture that is of God's peace. It stands guard at the door of the believer's heart at all times. It helps us steadily cling to Christ. It prevents care from wearing on our hearts. It reminds us to hold onto God's promises, praying them back to him each and every day. God's peace, found in Christ, reminds us to trust that he will care for us.

Yes Christians, life itself can rob our emotions of happiness, of joy, and of peace. Sin can corrupt the relationships we once loved, and put a dark cloud over a normally joyful season like Christmas. But none of our outward struggles can take away the deepest and greatest joy we have in our advent king, or the peace He bestows on us. Yes Christians, *The Lord is near*. He is coming soon. So *Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again, Rejoice!* Amen.