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Philippians 4:4-7  
Advent 3  
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In 1992, Her Majesty the Queen, after a particularly difficult year of family drama, political tensions, and almost losing Windsor Castle in a fire, labeled the year *Annus Horribilus* – a horrible year. In the way only the British can do, she offered a masterful understatement, “1992 is not a year on which I shall look back with undiluted pleasure.” As it turns out, this is my last full-length sermon of the 2018 calendar year – a year in which I am ready to turn the page. I know I am not alone, many of you have confided in me that this year has been filled with unusual concoctions of pain and heartache, loss and angst. Come on 2019!

A new year is coming but even better yet – Christmas is coming. And today in the middle of Advent, with all of its minor chords and wailing prophets, we finally get a break from the weight of this season for a happier note. Today is the third Sunday in Advent, traditionally called *Gaudete Sunday*; it is Latin for rejoice. This is the week in Advent when a celebratory rose-colored candle replaces the penitential purple as the liturgical color around the Advent wreath. All of the calls to repent, prepare, and convert are transformed into calls for joy in the midst of struggle, love in the face of adversity, and faith in a world enveloped in cynicism. Yes, this is the week we have been waiting for – the taster for what is to come – the joy that comes at Christmas, the joy that comes with Christ.

From beginning to end, Paul’s letter to the Philippians is etched with joy and filled with the summons to rejoice. The exhortation reaches its crescendo in 4:4: “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, Rejoice.” Note that Paul says not simply, “Rejoice,” but “Rejoice in the Lord.” The qualifying phrase is crucial – the source of joy is found in God. Joy in the Lord is altogether different from a happy mood we may be in because things seem to be going our way. Christian joy is deeper and more lasting than that. We rejoice in the Lord because of the grace of God freely given to us in Jesus Christ. We rejoice in the Lord because our sins can be forgiven and new chapters can begin. We rejoice in the Lord because no matter how dark the days or how low the valleys, with God we are never alone.

It is the spirit of joy, which characterizes life in Christ: not weariness, or fear, or frugality, or piety, but a spirit of joy. Joy underpinned by a deep belief that the Lord is near. The Lord is near to us every time we pray, or serve, or worship, or even in the times when our own bodies and souls feel very far from God – still even then God is near. For this we can rejoice.

Paul might sound like a rosy-glassed optimist to the uninformed but those who know his story and his struggle know that it is from a place of deep faith and the experiences of trial from which he speaks. This very letter to his dear friends in Philippi was written from behind prison bars and yet still he finds reasons to rejoice – for his faith, his calling, his friendships, his future, and his Lord. Superficial optimism has nothing to do with what Paul calls joy. “Joy in

Philippians,” Karl Barth observes, “is a defiant ‘nevertheless!’” I can kind of imagine Paul in prison writing this letter with a smile on his face, thinking of his friends, thinking of his mission, and thinking of the God who provided the foundation for his life. He was probably whistling as he wrote. This is defiant joy.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote, “Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in the might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord.” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

Boasting is another way of speaking about our joy. For the Christian, our joy is not in degrees, status, or assets. For the Christian, joy is found in knowing an eternal God and being known and loved by that God. I am wondering if we ever mentioned this call to live joyful lives to our new members at the conference they attended? I wonder if while we were trying to teach you about doctrine, and fellowship, and service if we told you about what a joy it is to be a follower of Jesus Christ? And did we tell you that the Christian’s life should be one which majors in joy? When we come to have faith in Christ, come to believe that Jesus Christ is the Way and the Truth and the Life for us then the byproduct of that faith is joy. Karl Barth says, “The theologian who has no joy in his work is not a theologian at all.” This makes me think of some of my very grumpy seminary professors and want to call them up and say, “Hey, what’s going on with you?” Of course, I will not do that but it’s fun to think about.

Captivated by the gift of God in Christ Jesus, Paul cannot help but rejoice, and he urges us to join him in rejoicing. Mary at the annunciation of the coming birth of Christ said, “My spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Joy needs to be part of our journey towards Christmas because Christmas is all about joy; the Christ child was bringing joy to a weary world. Joy in a child, joy in simple blessings, joy in community, joy in service, joy in creation – these are all divine gifts and Jesus is the embodiment of those gifts, the blessings from God.

There is an interesting tension that both Paul and Mary in their situations lift up for us – it is the ability to feel multiple intense yet conflicting feelings at once. Paul, in prison, deeply concerned about his future and the future of the early church, also finds the ability to rejoice in his faith. Mary, blessed with an incredible weight of responsibility, in carrying the Christ child, feels holy terror at what the future will hold for her and for this baby, and yet still she finds the ability to sing out and rejoice. Maybe this is where the defiant part comes in. There are very obvious reasons for both Paul and Mary to be anxious, terrified, and despondent – and yet because of their faith in God they are able to present a more fulsome perspective to their present situations. They are wonderful role models for us when we find ourselves in hard places, confusing chapters, or in the

middle of agonizing loss – there is room for all of the intensity of those feelings and yet still a space for rejoicing.

The Christian does not have to deny or suppress our feelings of anger or lament or sorrow or worry and yet these feelings are undergirded with a greater foundation. It is that foundation which makes it possible to articulate and genuinely feel these conflicting feelings. It is like every funeral service, which the church titles ‘A celebration of life and witness to the resurrection’; there is something so hopeful and uplifting in that title. Yet we know what we are there to do – to grieve the loss of life and yet still our faith also allows us simultaneously to rejoice in the Lord.

This is the thing about life as a Christian – that God does not promise that we will not face difficulties or wilderness experiences but God does promise to provide a secure and lasting foundation. God has given us sources of joy in our lives even in the lean years – our faith should help us to keep that perspective. Our deeper sense of joy is underpinned by the abiding love and presence of our God – the God who provides all of the grand and simple blessings in our lives. On Advent 3, it is the time to count those blessings, remember the joy we have in the Lord and the joys we experience in this life, and also anticipate the eternal joys embodied for us at Christmas. We are called to allow that joy to surface, to proclaim that joy, and to embody that joy – just like Paul, just like Mary, just like Jesus. Our faith is a joyful faith for our God is a loving, merciful, and present God – in all seasons.

Mary Oliver has a poem titled *Don't Hesitate*.

*If you suddenly and unexpectedly feel joy, don't hesitate. Give in to it. There are plenty of lives and whole towns destroyed or about to be. We are not wise, and not very often kind. And much can never be redeemed. Still life has some possibility left. Perhaps this is its way of fighting back, that sometimes something happens better than all the riches or power in the world. It could be anything, but very likely you notice it in the instant when love begins. Anyway, that's often the case. Anyway, whatever it is, don't be afraid of its plenty. Joy is not made to be a crumb.*

If you have faith in God and God's Son – then you have found joy. Deep and lasting joy, even for the terrible, horrible, no good very bad days. Still there is joy...joy in the Lord. The Lord is near, that is the promise of Advent, a promise delivered at Christmas. The nearness of the Lord is our great comfort, our great love, and our great joy. If you know this joy – the joy of the blessings of today, the joy of the faith of tomorrow, don't hesitate. Rejoice!

Amen.