

3 Advent, RCL C, December 16, 2018

"Rejoice in the Lord always! Be anxious for nothing." If we didn't know that these spiritual directions came from one of the most seasoned and mature apostles of Christ, we might ask, "What is this nonsense? It's like telling a swimmer, foundering in heavy seas, 'Don't be wet!'... Or telling someone crawling through Death Valley, 'Don't be thirsty!'"

How can Paul say these things to people who struggle, who have fears, who are anxious, who have suffered losses? It might help us to remember that Paul writes these words from his Roman prison cell, awaiting trial and possible execution... to a small, relatively new Christian assembly facing persecution for "subverting Roman practice and tradition."

What does joy look like? And how is it different from happiness, or gladness, in that it has its own imperative voice verb: "rejoice!" God directs us, in our cherished Holy Scriptures --over and over and over again, especially in the psalms--to rejoice! "I will be glad and rejoice in you... Rejoice in the Lord... In him our hearts rejoice!

Here's an image. Picture Jimmy Stewart, in Frank Capra's 1946 film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, as George Bailey, alive again, running and slipping through the falling snow back to his small-town life of Bedford Falls, with his miserable little Building and Loan company, and Mary, and Zu-zu, and forgetful Uncle Billy, and all his loyal friends. (Don't you wish that your life had a musical sound-track to help emphasize your great and joyful moments?)

In general, happiness is the experience of buoyant emotion when something agreeable happens to us: you win the door prize; you hook, play and land the trophy fish... your team scores; you didn't forget your dermatology appointment; it's *next* week.

Rejoicing, by contrast, is more than an inward experience. ***It is an expression***, the *telling out* of our sense of well-being, based in a sense that there is something deeply right and good about our lives.

Our Christian faith promises us that Joy comes as we answer God's initiative of giving himself to us, by opening and giving ourselves in return. (repeat) Much of our liturgy is designed to guide our hearts and minds to commit ourselves to Christ. "And here we offer and present ourselves, our souls and bodies..." repeatedly, habitually, week after week, rehearsing aloud what we know, in the deepest part of us, is true, right, good and necessary.

Joy comes with the recognition that not only can we be connected to God, but that by God's gracious love, we ***belong to him***.... That ***the fullness of God's goodness and truth can fill us and uphold us.***

If that is possible--in the face of untrustworthy political shenanigans, in the face of a whip sawing stock market, with personal health taking an unwelcome turn—why don't we search out that connection? Why would we, instead, opt for expressions of fear, annoyance, accusations?

The way the scripture describes that fullness is in the phrase, “He” –that is, the Messiah, the Christ—“will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” The Greek word, “to baptize,” means to soak or to immerse. Think of your hand-washable sweater getting clean in the sink. The fabric absorbs, and is saturated by the water in which it is dunked. So with the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the nature, power, and presence of God extended to human beings. The whole purpose of God is to connect with, to fill, to refresh, to make new, to give real life to those God loves. The Holy Spirit is not some calm place in a remote little corner of our consciences.... The Holy Spirit’s work in us is not simply to provide us with a “to-do list” of chores by which we’re supposed to correct the shortcomings of the cosmos; The Holy Spirit is not just the attitude preference for “positivity” instead of fault-finding.

When we pray for a little one being baptized, or when we offer ourselves anew in the worship and service of God in Holy Communion, we’re asking God to connect us with Him.... ***We’re asking God to saturate us with his nature, his presence, and his loving power to recognize the truth, and to do good by surrendering ourselves to it.*** We’re accepting God’s offer of sharing our lives and love.

St. Paul directs us to rejoice “*in the Lord.*”

The epistle to the Ephesians alone references the believer as being “in Christ” twenty-seven times. Whenever the New Testament passages speak of our being “in Christ,” or “in the Lord,” they describe the faithful as being spiritually united to and identified with Christ. What follows from that faith-based union is that all the blessings and the benefits obtained by Christ— forgiveness, eternal life, a lively spiritual connection to the everliving God, love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, generosity—the whole cornucopia of God’s expressed goodwill, ***belong to us, and are alive within and among us as well!***

That’s what it means to be “in Christ;” And when we are alert to that state of being, ***joy*** is the outcome.

Then we read, “Let your ἐπιεικὲς (epieikes); (translated “gentleness, reasonableness, or graciousness”) be evident to all. The Lord is at hand.” The Greek word, describing what everyone should observe in us, conveys ***the idea of generosity or the willingness to make allowances; the quality that keeps one from always insisting on one’s full rights. It’s the opposite of entitlement; the opposite of always demanding one’s due. It is the patient willingness to yield wherever yielding does not compromise moral principle.*** Don’t we all recognize how rare, winsome, and fine that attribute is? And, St. Paul tells us, this behavior is possible precisely because the Lord is at hand; because we are in Christ; because we are currently, and continuously connected!

That relationship with God’s indwelling Spirit is the glorious element that enables us to banish our worries and fear by lifting our concerns in prayer to God. That personal presence of Christ

within us is what enables us to experience the peace that the world cannot give, the peace that surpasses understanding, the peace from above. That gift of God to the faithful is what enables us to express thanksgiving, and to rejoice, and to pray with confidence, no matter how troublesome our circumstances may be. We know whose we are; we rejoice! We know who ransomed us from spiritual captivity and invites us all to enter freely into this fellowship with God. And we rejoice!

I'll let the Apostle Paul say it another way:

"We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and **not from us**. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body... ...we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus...

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Christianity with out Christ's indwelling presence is a tall sailing ship... without any wind; a botanical garden without sunlight; a toaster without electricity. Lord, come to us; and we will rejoice in you: always... Always... Always...

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