Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Rejoice In The Lord Always**

**Philippians 4:4-7**

Rorate Coeli – Advent IV

12.20.2020

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

“What’s there to rejoice about?” you are thinking. COVID is keeping much of the family apart this Christmas, we are not even supposed to gather as family according to the CDC and much of the government. How do you rejoice at Christmas with that as the situation in which we live?

Given this whole pandemic, there are some family members who are sick. We are not sure how sick they will become, and we know that both Aunt Heloise and Great-Uncle Sheldon both died from this. So, as we wait, how do we rejoice?

Our furnace finally died, we had to replace it – there’s $4,000.00 we don’t have right now. We had to get a loan. With reduced hours at work, meaning limited income, and Christmas upon us with presents we have to buy, how do we rejoice?

There are a thousand and one reasons that we could give for why there is no reason to rejoice. But are there?

Maybe not being able to get together with family for Christmas because of COVID is a reason to rejoice. I am not talking about the fact that Uncle Hezekiah always gets drunk and argumentative, so not having him around is a good thing.

If Christmas in your world has become focused upon gathering with family, having to spend gobs of money on presents, and time in God’s house to celebrate the birth of our Savior sort of gets shoe-horned into the family gathering events – only if it is convenient, then maybe this is a year to rejoice.

It is a year to rejoice because maybe this year is an opportunity to return to the main focal point of Christmas, and that is Christ.

Of course it may be that Christ ***is* the focal point**, and if certain family members **do not** get together with you, then Christ **is not** a part of ***their*** Christmas. They were not brought up that way, but they have wandered far from the faith since their youth.

It is easy to find reasons not to rejoice, especially when we focus upon the things which are only of this worldly realm, the things we ***WANT*** and which we ***THINK*** give us joy in this life.

Just a few verses before our text, God inspired Paul to record these words:

*Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. For many walk, of whom I have often told you, and now tell you in tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their God is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power which enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.* (Phil. 3:17-21)

Paul is describing that there are two ways you live your life. You live as those whose glory is the cross, or you live as enemies of the cross, those whose God is their belly. To have your belly as your god is a life that is set to satisfy the cravings and desires of the flesh. Such people glory in their shame, minds set on earthly things.

You and I know our sinfulness. We know when we gossip, lie, cheat, steal, harbor hatred in our hearts, commit adultery – whether with our body or simply in our minds. But the sinfulness we do acknowledge, the sinfulness we rarely think about because we consider it no big deal, is the fact that we have another god.

We like to set up our own conditions of what life in this world should be like. We know what we think it means to be successful, to be happy, to be fulfilled. How often does God take a back seat to those things which we deem should come first. We will even exclaim that God understands, that He gave us this life to live, and we are supposed to enjoy it. If we are enjoying the life He gave to us, He understands when we take time away from Him to do so.

Do you truly think that God is happy when we cut Him out of the limited time we devote to Him? Do you honestly think that the third commandment says, “Remember the sabbath day by keeping it holy once in a while?”

It is so easy to ask, “What is there to rejoice about?” It is especially easy to ask it, and to think we are right in asking it, if our god is our belly.

John is again in our Gospel lesson. He is being questioned, bullied by those who do not like what he is doing because people are trusting in the forgiveness he is dispensing. John’s life was tough. Last week we found him in prison for preaching against the adultery of Herod and Herodias. We know she will ask for his head, and Herod will deliver it. Life was never easy for the prophets in this world, even those who were supposed to be God’s chosen people treated the prophets poorly – even killing them.

Jesus was the very Son of God, the One long foretold, and the Israelites – God’s chosen people – cried out for Him to be crucified. Jesus declared that whoever loves son or daughter more than Him is not worthy of Him. Whoever loves mother or father more than Him is not worthy of Him. Whoever does not hate his life, take up his cross and follow Him, is not worthy of Him.

Knowing these words of Christ, we think we should not rejoice because life isn’t as perfect as we’d like it to be? And it is not as perfect as we’d like it to be only because we are more in love with satisfying the pleasures of our flesh in this world than we are about what is god-pleasing.

By the way, I want you to pay very close attention right now. I know, you are not very happy with what I have just declared. You do not think it is fair. Are you listening? As much as I am preaching to you, I was the one convicted first when I preached this sermon in the mirror. I’ve heard this sermon a couple times, and I will hear it three times this morning – and every time, it makes me bow my head in repentance.

That is right where God wants me – and you – to be!

He wants us there, for then we can rejoice ***IN THE LORD ALWAYS!!!***

Six days from now we will celebrate the birth of Jesus, hearing the angel proclaim, “unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.” There is reason to rejoice, just as our text says, “rejoice in the Lord.”

It is this one who came into our flesh and put God first in all things. He was in the world, which He created, but never in love with it. This world we live in is fallen, corrupted by sinfulness, and is dying. But Jesus has overcome the world. He defeated sin with His gloriously sinless and holy life. He conquered death – that one thing which brings us the greatest fear – with His own death upon the cross. And He grants to us joy to face each day with His triumphant resurrection.

Our life is lived in Christ. We know what awaits us for He has declared it to us, not just in words, but in His own resurrected flesh. Christ knows our infatuation with these things of this world, and so it is with the most simple things of this world that He gives to us His greatest gifts.

It is not this year’s winner of The Voice who fills our ears with the sweetest music. Instead, it is Christ’s word, spoken by the same droning voice of our pastor, which declares the most glorious notes to our starving ears, “your sins are forgiven!”

I would love to sit down to a seven course meal at a five-star restaurant. Let it start with lobster bisque and end with bourbon turtle cheesecake. But more satisfying still to this body of mine which is ever aging and exhibiting the ravages of sin is the very simple bread given to me when I kneel at the Table Christ sets before in the presence of our enemies sin and death. For that bread is His very body, the same flesh pierced for me for forgiveness, and which strengthens me in faith to life everlasting.

While there may come a day when I may be able to enjoy a $5,000 bottle of beaujoisle from the year my father was born, and think it heavenly. I drink today of that which ***is*** heavenly – the very blood of Christ sacramentally united to that which the cup on our altar presently holds. This drink bestows forgiveness, life, and salvation. It grants to me Christ and lifts up my faith to rejoice in God my Savior.

You are granted life in this world, and indeed we are to enjoy it. But when life in this world does not go as we might like – or as this world suggests that it should go – we know that there is so much more to life. True life is in Christ! True life in Christ is life lived under the cross, knowing that it is life eternal, a glorious resurrection to heavenly bliss awaiting us. A life eternal so beauteous we cannot even imagine it.

So I let Paul declare to you, Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice. We can and should rejoice in everything because we know that the things of this world are passing away. This life is but a fleeting moment. *But our citizenship is in heaven, from which we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform our lowly body to be like His glorious body, by the power which enables Him even to subject all things to Himself.*

You are those who know this peace of God, a peace which surpasses all understanding. Amen.