

“REJOICE ALWAYS”
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
A Sermon by John Thomason
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When he writes his first letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul starts out using a wide-angle lens, surveying and addressing issues in Christian communities as a whole; but he then uses a zoom lens to search out and exhort individual Christians. You and I may want to hide in the crowd, but, as usual, Paul gets pointed and personal. The apostle identifies attitudes and behaviors which should characterize the lives of each person who claims to follow Jesus Christ. Here’s a sampling: “Rejoice always; pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

Our first reaction to such advice might be, “That’s about as ludicrous as it gets! Paul has lost his mind! Rejoice continuously? Pray 24/7? Give thanks in every situation? Nothing could be more counter-intuitive, more out of touch with reality.”

This past week, a friend and fellow minister in the deep South reflected on the fact that today the Church is lighting “candle three of Advent’s four, the one and only pink candle on the Advent wreath, the Light of Joy.” He admitted, “Every year, even in the easiest and best of years, I wonder if it will burn. Given the amount of sorrow, uncertainty, disappointment, and pain with which so many live, I annually hold my breath to see if Joy will decline her turn, or light and burn.”

Indeed, you and I know joy to be fragile and fleeting. We also know joy is a feeling that cannot be forced – you know, “Cheer up; things could be worse; put on a happy face.” It just doesn’t work. This is especially true during this Advent season, 2020, when our “sorrow, uncertainty, disappointment, and pain” are ratcheted higher than ever before. Who among us can “rejoice always” when we’re faced with a global pandemic and political polarization, when our anxiety, fear and loneliness threaten to eclipse the light of Christmas? You and I may conclude that we cannot “rejoice always, pray without ceasing [and] “give thanks in all circumstances” – because sometimes our circumstances are lousy.

Today’s Scripture lessons on this third Sunday of Advent all reflect times when circumstances are at their worst, when lighting a candle of Joy would be like trying to strike a match during a hurricane. The prophet Isaiah is writing to “captive Israel,” a nation living in the midst of destruction and exile, waiting for their deliverance. The apostle Paul is writing to a Church that has experienced Christ’s coming already but is now living in the not yet, waiting for Christ to return and redeem them from their suffering. The Evangelist John is writing to a world that is waiting for God’s light to dawn but doesn’t recognize that light when it comes. In other words, no one in these situations is in the mood to rejoice around the clock.

In a collection of Christmas stories, Rex Knowles shares a small homespun parable. He had shut himself in his study when there was a knock on his door. His children had a play to perform, and he could tell it was a Christmas play because of the lighted flashlight wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a shoe box. His eight-year old daughter entered the room, undulating like she was riding a camel, bedecked with all the available jewelry. She carried a pillow holding

three items. After bowing to the holy family, she announced, “I am all three wise men. I bring precious gifts: gold, circumstance, and mud.”

Knowles writes that instead of laughing at this mistake, he prayed, which today seems exactly right. That eight-year old turned out to be a prophetess, because you and I now live in a time of “circumstance and mud.” Conditions are worse than usual this year. In truth, most of life is a messy combination of circumstance and mud. But the further truth is that the mess is sometimes made beautiful by our decision to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, [and] give thanks in all circumstances.”

The theme of today’s Advent candle lines up perfectly with the theme of today’s Scripture lessons. The candle represents joy, and the lessons call us to rejoice. This past week I noticed something about these two words which I had never observed before. The word “joy” is a noun, referring to a feeling of great pleasure or happiness. By definition, joy comes and goes, like all feelings come and go. You know the old saying, “happiness depends on happenings.” When happenings are favorable, we feel joy; when happenings are unfavorable, we feel sadness. The word “rejoice,” on the other hand, is a verb. To rejoice is to demonstrate delight and gratitude; it is an action word. Rejoice is something we do, not just feel. To rejoice is a choice, and what gives us hope is that we can choose to rejoice even we are feeling less than joyful.

If you’re wondering how this is possible, look again at today’s readings from the Old Testament prophet and the New Testament apostle. In Isaiah, God announces a new age when all those who are oppressed will receive divine justice and favor, when God will give all those who are hurting “a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness rather than mourning, the mantle of praise rather than a faint spirit” (Isaiah 61:3a). But notice: this new state of affairs is described in the future tense; all of these promises remain unfulfilled; God’s oppressed people are still waiting to be set free. And yet, in the middle of this ongoing gloom and doom, Isaiah declares, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my whole being shall exult in my God” (v. 10a).

Do you hear what Isaiah’s words suggest for us? You and I are able to rejoice today, not because our circumstances have dramatically improved – because they haven’t, at least not yet. No, we rejoice because of who God is and because we hold fast to the promises of God. We rejoice even while we wait – while we wait for a vaccine for the virus; while we wait for a gentler, kinder America; while we wait to return to our classrooms, workplaces, and churches; while we wait to see our family members and friends face-to-face again. We don’t rejoice in our present circumstance and mud; but, like Isaiah, we do “rejoice in the Lord.”

Likewise, when Paul exhorts us to “rejoice always,” he’s not expecting us to be giddy all the time, least of all during our seasons of suffering. He’s not asking us to conjure up a feeling we don’t have; he’s asking us to take action – to praise God for God’s faithfulness, in the worst of times as well as the best of times.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul again calls for perpetual rejoicing; but he goes on to identify the source and object of our rejoicing, and it is the same as it is for Isaiah: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). Let’s be clear about this: Paul is no Pollyanna; he knows the feeling of joy appears and then disappears like daylight and darkness; but he also knows it is possible to rejoice in both the high noon of happiness and the bleak midnight

of despair. Why? Because we “rejoice in the Lord,” because the reason we rejoice is God’s unfluctuating faithfulness.

I perfectly understand if you’re not in a joyful mood this Christmas, and I don’t have to guess why. In an editorial cartoon on December 3, Santa Claus is holding court on his big throne in a department store. A little girl is talking to him; but she’s not there in-person, sitting on his lap. Instead, she’s talking to Santa on a computer screen, and it’s the laptop that is sitting on his lap! She says to Santa, “All I want for Christmas is for things to be the way they used to be.”

This seems to me to be a reasonable request, an expectation we all share for Christmas, 2020. The problem is that even in normal years, so many of our expectations for Christmas are excessive and unrealistic. They are shaped largely by our culture, which pressures us to go and do and eat and spend and, above all, be happy. “May your days be merry and bright, and may all your Christmases be white.” This is how we’re supposed to feel and what the landscape of our lives is supposed to look like. The reality for some of us is very different. The days leading up to Christmas can be somber and dark. They can sharpen our awareness of how we’ve been disappointed, what we’ve lost, and who we are missing. They can remind us that we are still in exile, still suffering, still waiting to be anointed with “the oil of gladness.”

This will be only the second Christmas in my entire lifetime that I have spent separated from my mother and brother in Texas. The only other time we were apart was in 1971, the year I was studying in England. I actually spent Christmas Day in Rome, Italy, in the presence of Pope Paul VI and thousands of other pilgrims. Thankfully, I also had the companionship of two fellow students from my home seminary in Kentucky. We bought a small artificial Christmas tree that was already decorated with tacky ornaments. We placed the tree on a small table in our small hotel room. My friends and I exchanged gifts, and I certainly enjoyed the company of my buddies. But I wasn’t kidding myself; they weren’t the same as family. Christmas was a bit of a letdown that year, marked more by separation and sadness than by togetherness and joy.

It was then that it occurred to me for the first time in my life, “Maybe I ought to expect less of Christmas and expect more of Christ. Maybe Christmas is not about who we are with and what we want and how we feel; maybe Christmas is about a God who is with us, about what God wants for us and how God feels about us.

Friends, when you and I have this awareness of God, we can “rejoice always”; we can “pray without ceasing”; we can “give thanks in all circumstances.” We can rejoice even in the circumstance and mud of a Christmas that is different from any other we have ever known. Every year, but especially this year, we hold our collective breath to see if the candle of Joy will burn. And every year, no matter what, when Joy’s turn comes, Joy’s wick burns, because we rejoice in the Lord.