

Sermon Draft

Text: Philippians 4:4–7

Sermon: Rejoice Always

It is the Sunday of joy. Advent, in parallel to Lent, acquired a penitential cast in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, the return of Christ to reign over his creation and his Church. Reflection over sin, confession, and fasting have all been helpful disciplines to focus the Church's preparation for the one who will "*supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus*" (Philippians 4:19).

Yet such penitence and abstinence cannot restrain the joy of the coming of the Lord full of grace and truth. So, the church, in its penitence and waiting according to Paul's exhortation, cries out: Rejoice! The Lord of Peace Comes to You!

We will always be facing opposition. Paul, in writing to the Philippians, recognizes that the Gospel is facing obstacles and opposition that burden both the Church's hope in the promise of Christ and the joyful witness to the Good News by the Church.

Obstacles and opposition are no less true in our own day and age, even if in different cultural form and substance.

There is and has been conflict in the Church from the beginning. The Philippian congregation faced opposition to its freedom in the Gospel from Judaizing legalists who would seek to impose the Mosaic Law on the Church (3:2–3).

The Church today faces legalisms of all kinds that attack our freedom in Christ. The Philippian congregation faced internal conflict that divided God’s people and created unrest. Congregations today face divisions, from within and from without of many kinds that create unrest.

Opposition from the unbelieving world. Hardship and suffering are expected for those who confess Christ as Lord (1:29). Christ himself suffered “*even death on a cross*” (2:8). Those who are in Christ will suffer for his name’s sake: “*For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now*

hear that I still have” (1:29–30). Paul is in prison “for Christ” (1:12–14). The Philippians are called to imitate Paul in his suffering and in all things (3:17). Stop living as though nothing big has happened. The Lord is here! In the face of this conflict and opposition from both without and within, the Philippians are living in an unsettled state, anxious and without peace. Their hope in Christ is being undermined by the external circumstances of the Church’s life in the unbelieving world. Paul’s exhortation in this text is intended to build them up and to demonstrate what it means for them to “***join in imitating [Paul]***” (3:17) and, ultimately, to “***have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus***” (2:5).

Paul reminds them as he asks, what have you seen and heard? “***The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them***” (Luke 7:22).

The Philippians have seen through Paul and the other apostles' proclamation what Jesus manifests and proclaims to John the Baptist's disciples in the Gospel from Luke 7.

The fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy means that, as Paul says in our text, "***the Lord is at hand***" (v 5). He has come and is here among his people, even his people in Philippi and in every place where the Church assembles.

The ministry of Jesus is the prophetic fulfillment of the Promised Messiah. As Paul recounts in Philippians 2, Jesus takes on the form of this very messianic servant and suffers death, even death on a cross, and therefore God highly exalts him by raising him from the dead and bestows upon him before all of creation the very name of God himself, Lord of all in heaven and on earth (2:6–11).

So, we live, trusting that he is here and will return. Christians live differently than the rest of the world, and that should be evident to everyone.

The basis for living differently is the knowledge that Christ is present with his people now through his Word and will someday return to call his own to himself in the resurrection of the dead.

As Paul says: *That by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. Only let us hold true to what we have attained.* (3:11–16)

Living in this truth, Paul calls us, the Church, to imitate him by: “*Rejoicing always! Rejoicing is not to be limited. For those who live in Christ, joy is constant. Always! It is the gift of God that comes from walking by the Spirit*” (Galatians 5:22).

It is one of the many gifts that God gives to those who belong to Christ and upon whom the Spirit has been poured out. Along with other gifts of the Spirit (love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control), constant joy distinguishes the Church from the world.

It is independent of life's circumstances, such as conflict and opposition. Since joy is a gift of the Spirit in Christ, it does not arise from life's circumstances. No matter the conflict that arises in a congregation that confesses Christ and the opposition that the unbelieving world brings to bear upon the Church, joy is a constant of the Church's life in the present age. And that joy will shape how we respond to conflict and opposition. We respond as those who live with hope in Christ.

Showing forbearance, or reasonableness. In a very politicized society like the United States, it is easy for the Church to conform to the world rather than to Christ. American political and social life is not known for its reasonableness and forbearance.

The Church should be different, and Paul exhorts the Church living in Christ to do so.

This is to show humility and patience with steadfastness to everyone. Reasonableness and forbearance is to be shown not only to believers but to everyone, including unbelievers, those who oppose and persecute the Church. Forbearance is a gracious gentleness that attends to others wherever they are in life and in understanding.

This is to be done in the midst of suffering and conflict. The Church is to demonstrate such forbearance to those who oppose and persecute the Church. Opposition is to be met with gentleness, not with equal opposition. Likewise, conflict within the Church is to be handled with patience and kindness (Galatian 5:22). Hatred and derision between brothers and sisters in Christ has no place in the Church.

All conflict within the Church is to be handled by brothers and sisters who love one another in Christ, with humility in themselves and with gentleness toward their brother and sister.

Being anxious about nothing. Paul's exhortation concludes with a call for the Church not to be anxious about anything. Recognition that the living Lord is present among his people means that anxiety and fear have no place among God's people.

Paul's exhortation "***not to be anxious about anything***" recognizes the anxiety that accompanies human life this side of the rebellious fall. Since we divorced ourselves from the source of life and the Word that sustains human life and provides for every need of body and soul, anxiety has filled human living.

Anxiety surfaces because we have no ultimate control over anything, especially whether we live or die, because we can't guarantee providing for ourselves what we need to survive, and because we naturally aren't going to trust others to provide for us. Anxiety can pounce from any corner. Anxiety can paralyze us! The Peace has to come from outside of us, from outside of our anxiety. And peace does come, just as it did to Paul in prison in Rome. A peace that passes all understanding. The peace of Christ Jesus.

The Lord is at hand (Philippians 4:5, 7). Don't be anxious about anything!

Instead of being anxious, we pray with thanksgiving to God the Father about all things and all people. The Church is shaped to strive to live without anxiety by praying for everything. Praying for everything demonstrates that one's trust is in the Lord, who will attend to every need and every request of God's people. Entrusting everything to God through prayer means that there is nothing about which God's people need be or should be anxious.

Instead of being anxious, we know through the Word, lived out in prayer, God's peace, which will indeed guard hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Through the prayer that the Church offers in the Word, the Church will know and experience that peace of God. Peace in Christ is our divine sentry, the soldier who guards our hearts and minds our entire lives.

It is easy for Christians to be taken captive by the anxieties that fill our earthly lives, especially the fear as to whether the Lord of all creation is in our midst. He is risen from the dead and exalted above every name in heaven and on earth. He is at hand, here, in the presence of his people. Don't be anxious about anything. On this day, during this season of Advent, of coming, rejoice! The Lord of peace comes to you!

Amen