

“The Promise of Prayer”

A sermon preached by
The Rev. Dr. Douglas E. Nagel
September 23, 2018

TEXTS: Acts 16: 25-34 and Philippians 4:4-7

Acts 16: 25-34

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was an earthquake, so violent that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's chains were unfastened. When the jailer woke up and saw the prison doors wide open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, since he supposed that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul shouted in a loud voice, 'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' The jailer called for lights, and rushing in, he fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them outside and said, 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?' They answered, 'Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.' They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.

Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Like every person hearing my voice, I have had days of rejoicing and exultation. Our wedding day, the birth of our two children, making it to my sixtieth birthday, and the opportunity to walk across four different stages and be handed a variety of pieces of paper that say I have been to school for a long time are just a few of the high points. At the same time, I have had days where rejoicing was hard and sometimes impossible. My daughter's two-week stay in the hospital when she was eighteen months old and for one week they had no idea what was wrong with her, the death of my dad after a twelve-year struggle with prostate cancer, my mother's descent into dementia and her eventual passing, and my multiple joint replacements have not been my best days.

Are Christians meant to always walk around with smiles on our faces even when our hearts are breaking? Are we somehow less than faithful if we experience pain, suffering, grief or loss?

Hardly! If you read the Psalms faithfully, you will hear the full spectrum of human emotional experience. In this epistle, Paul speaks of joy or rejoicing over sixteen times. Yet, look at what Paul experienced because of his own witness for Jesus Christ in 2 Corinthians 11:24-27: imprisonments, floggings, 39 lashes five different times, three times beaten with rods, shipwrecked, and constantly in danger, hungry, thirsty, and naked. Do you think Paul knows that of which he speaks? Do you believe that he is serious when he says 'Rejoice'? I believe he is because he has experienced the full spectrum of human emotion.

In verse four, Paul tells his hearers to always rejoice. There are some qualifiers, though. First, this is a command. The verb is second person, present, active imperative. To put it in the vernacular, Paul is saying, "I command all y'all to rejoice in the Lord always."

As Ralph Wilson writes in his commentary on this passage, "The Philippian Christians are to take joy, that is, find joy, in the fact of God's love for them, that Jesus has died for their sins, in the promise that their names are written in the Book of Life, that the Holy Spirit is with them constantly, that they have eternal life with God." (http://www.jesuswalk.com/philippians/8_rejoice.htm)

This is not a matter of emotion. It is a matter of obedience. We are to rejoice even when we do not feel like rejoicing. It is so much easier when circumstances support rejoicing. People who drive around with their "Life is good" window stickers fascinate me. What if their circumstances change? What about those times when life gets hard? Is life still good for them?

Like you, I have experienced difficulties and challenges. I remember in 2007 when I went through clinical depression. This passage of Scripture crossed my mind repeatedly. Rejoice? Really? That is when the words of this morning's first song really hit home. Rejoicing was to be about obedience, not feeling. It was truly a 'sacrifice of praise' because I didn't feel like praising God. I didn't feel like rejoicing.

Sometimes circumstances and the situations life throws at us really stink. Even then we are commanded to rejoice always. The qualifier is that we are not to rejoice in our circumstances. We are commanded to rejoice in the Lord always. Paul wants us to know this so profoundly that he doubles down, saying, "Again I will say, 'Rejoice'."

When life is good, be glad about that. Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord, though. Why? Because circumstances will change. They always do. What we envision, what we hope, what we desire, doesn't always take place. Sometimes life is hard. What then?

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

The second song we sang this morning also provides some context. The Psalmist writes words that we often hear as a Call to Worship. "*This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (PS 118:24)* There is a reason the Psalmist can make this statement regardless of circumstances. The Psalm begins and ends with these words, "*O give thanks to the Lord, for He is good; his steadfast love endures forever.*" Those are the book-ends. In the middle is the declaration, "This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. (PS 118:24)"

So, if you rejoice in your circumstances, know that it will not last. Circumstances change. Corrie Ten Boom, the Dutch evangelist who hid many Jews from the Nazis during World War II, has written, "Joy runs deeper than despair." That is the statement of a faithful Christian who has discovered that happiness is fleeting and is not dependent upon circumstances. Joy underlies the Christian's experience of life, good or bad, because it doesn't depend upon circumstances.

It depends on One who does not change.

Thus, it is not, "Rejoice always." Instead, it is "Rejoice in the Lord always." That is the second qualifier. First, it is a command to rejoice. Second, it is the Lord in whom we are to rejoice.

Look at Paul and Silas in today's second Scripture reading. They are in Philippi, a Gentile city, preaching the Gospel. They upset the locals by delivering a young woman of an evil spirit. She was being used by several men to make money through her prophecies. They complain to the authorities and Paul and Silas end up in the Philippian hooskew.

Now, I have never been to jail except to visit. I have always managed to keep myself on the correct side of the bars. I know it is not a place where I would want to spend time. If I found myself there, I would likely be depressed, sullen, broken, hurting, and asking myself and God a LOT of questions! Yet, what do we find Paul and Silas doing? It's almost midnight. All the other prisoners are trying to get some shut-eye. Not Paul and Silas! They're awake, alert, praying, and singing praises to God!

Nowhere does Luke indicate a cause-and-effect relationship between their prayers and the earthquake that shook the building. That is not the point. However, the prison is shaken, the doors are open, the prisoners are free, and the jailer, is about to kill himself because he fears that he will be held responsible.

He asks what he must do to be saved. I don't think he is asking about his eternal destiny here. I think he is asking, "How do I keep my head?" Paul says, "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved, you and your household.*"

The jailer does. So, does his household. Notice verses 33 and 34. "*At the same hour of the night he [the jailer] took them [Paul and Silas] and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God.*"

They rejoiced, not in their circumstances. They rejoiced in God!

I love the words of the prophet Habakkuk in the Old Testament. Hear what he says in Habakkuk 3:17-18, *“Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior.”*

I love the words of Christian sociologist Tony Campolo. He writes, “When you were born, you cried and everybody else was happy. The only question that matters is this: When you die, will YOU be happy when everybody else is crying?”

You can be happy in the end, if as a person of faith, you can rejoice in the Lord always. Samuel Shoemaker, the spiritual influence behind Alcoholics Anonymous writes, *“The surest mark of a Christian is not faith, or even love, but joy.”* Joy is not in things. Joy is not in what happens to me from day to day. Joy is either in me or it is not because joy is based in the God who does not change.

Next, Paul admonishes his hearers and readers to live gently. *“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”* The word in the Greek can be rendered “reasonableness.” The King James Version translates it as “moderation.” The American Standard reads “forbearance.”

Why these words? We haven’t changed much as humans since the time when Paul wrote. Human nature is consistent. If God does not provide your moral compass, if Scripture does not guide your mind, if seeking to follow Jesus is not first on your agenda, it is easy for your life to go further off the rails when circumstances in life go south. When things get tough, people do crazy things. Marriage not satisfactory? You will justify an affair. Having trouble coping with life? Drug or alcohol abuse may present an attractive means of coping. Are you having trouble making ends meet? The temptation to take what doesn’t belong to you increases.

People seek solace in distractions, mind-numbing addictions, possessions, and illicit relationships because they mistakenly seek happiness. What they lack is joy. Joy is possible even when you are not happy because joy is an internal asset that does not depend upon an external circumstance. Joy is possible for the believer because of what Paul writes next.

“The Lord is near.”

God is always immediately accessible. We are never apart from God’s presence. We are never where God does not know our circumstance. This is the basis of joy.

Therefore, Paul says, believers need not worry about anything. Anything? Anything! Wait a second! I sometimes worry. Is there something wrong with me? No, I am just focusing on my circumstances instead of focusing on the Lord who is near. I’m allowing fear to drive out faith instead of allowing my faith in God to control the things that cause me concern.

Take one day at a time, even one moment at a time. Our tendency is to project into the future the uncertainties of the moment. Unless we can totally control the future, we cannot let the future consume us. Why be concerned about something I have no control over? Yet I can very easily allow something that hasn’t happened and might never happen destroy the very joy I can experience in the moment. For every “What if this happens?” we can ask, there is the corollary question, “What if this never happens?”

Long ago an Eastern monarch, plagued by many worries, harassed on every side, called his wise men together. He asked them to invent a motto, a few magic words that would help him in time of trial or distress. It must be brief enough to be engraved on a ring, he said, so that he could have it always before his eyes. It must be appropriate to every situation, as useful in prosperity as in adversity. It must be a motto wise and true and endlessly enduring, words by which a man could be guided all his life, in every circumstance, no matter what happened.

The wise men thought and thought, and finally came to the monarch with their magic words. They were words for every change or chance of fortune, declared the wise men ... words to fit every situation, good or bad ... words to ease the heart and mind in every circumstance. And the words they gave the monarch to engrave on his ring were:

THIS, TOO, SHALL PASS.

Can you really trust the God who is near? Jesus assured us that we can because God knows what we need. In Matthew 6:25-27, Jesus teaches his disciples, *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?”*

The same God who knows our need is the same God who will supply our need. In Paul's second Corinthian letter, he is trying to raise money for the Church in Jerusalem. He wants the Corinthians to be generous like the Macedonians who, although they had little resources, gave generously. When such appeals are made, our first thought is "What about me? What if I have to do without?" This is what Paul writes, "*Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*" (II Corinthians 9:10-11)

It is simplistic and ineffective to just say, "Don't worry." I know, I've tried it on LuAnn. If Paul said, "Don't worry" we could come back with, "Oh, that's helpful." Yet Paul gives an alternative to worry.

That alternative is prayer.

Worry wrings its hands and reacts to the world around it. It allows circumstances to dictate behavior. It allows situations to steal happiness. However, if we truly know and believe God is near, know that God is aware of our need and can supply our need, then prayer becomes active, not reactive. It is something we do before we ever get around to worrying.

Hugh Blair, the British poet has written, "Worry not about the possible troubles of the future; for if they come, you are but anticipating and adding to their weight; and if they do not come, your worry is useless; and in either case it is weak and in vain, and a distrust of God's providence."

He affirms what Paul says here, "*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*" (Philippians 4:6)

Paul is saying that we can trust God's providence. We know what prayer is. What is supplication? It's a fancy word that means "a prayer asking God to supply what we need." Note that "supply" is the root of the word "supplication." Notice also that the word "provide" is the root of "providence."

Simply put, if God knows our needs, if God can supply our needs, if God is near, then there is no need to worry about anything. Anything! Prayer then becomes our "go-to" activity instead of anxiety and worry becoming our default posture in the face of difficulty. God is near. God will help. We only need ask.

By prayer and supplication, we address the false notion that we are subject to the whims of the universe. By prayer and thanksgiving with thanksgiving, we are recognizing that God's attitude toward us is that of a loving, caring father who already knows, already hears, and will quickly act to give us what we need.

Don't worry. God is near. God knows. God hears. God answers. God supplies. All we need do is bring everything before the throne of grace by means of prayer and supplication with thanksgiving.

One of my favorite verses in Scripture is from Psalm 37, verse 25. It speaks the faith and testimony of the seasoned, tested saint, "*I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.*" You cannot arrive at that kind of faith by letting worry control your life.

God supplies all our needs. We might not like it, but God does that one day at a time.
Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. AMEN.