

WHERE WE ARE IN OUR LIFE OF FAITH  
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Texts: Philippians 4:4-7 & Luke 3:7-18

### 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.

### Luke 3:7-18

John said to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." And the crowds asked him, "What then should we do?" In reply he said to them, "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.

If you did a double-take when you heard the readings this morning, you're probably not alone. First we hear, "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say rejoice." Then we hear, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

What are we supposed to do with this? We're in the middle of Advent, and Advent is a time for focusing on the coming of the Lord and preparing our hearts to receive him. But

how are we supposed to do that when the advice we get from scripture is so contradictory? "Don't worry, be happy," Paul says in one ear. "Straighten up or else," John yells in the other.

Who are we supposed to listen to? Whose advice are we supposed to take? Well, it all depends, I think, on where we are in our life of faith.

People say the gospel is a two-edged sword: It cuts both ways. It comforts the afflicted and afflicts the comfortable. And we all have times in our lives when we fall into each one of those categories. We all have times when we feel beaten down and hopeless, and we don't know what we're going to do; and what we need at those times is to hear that God hasn't forgotten us and that we can always count on God to be there. And we all have times when we turn inward and become self-absorbed; and what we need at those times is to be shaken out of our complacency and reminded that God calls us to live, not for ourselves, but for others.

So it's not that these readings are contradictory. It's that they're addressing different needs we have depending on where we are in our life of faith. The one is giving us some reassurance, and the other is giving us a kick in the pants.

In the first reading, Paul is writing to the Philippians from a prison cell. He has been arrested by the Romans, and he's awaiting a trial that he almost certainly knows could lead to his execution. So he doesn't have much reason to be joyful, and yet he is. And he's also encouraging the Philippians to be joyful. "Don't worry about anything," he says, "just bring your worries to God, and God will take care of you."

He certainly doesn't sound like someone who's life is in jeopardy. You almost have to wonder if maybe he bumped his head, and he's a little bit delirious. How can anyone talk like that under those circumstances? Well, you have to realize that for Paul, joy isn't based on our circumstances, which can change from one day to the next. It's based on our relationship with God, who never changes. "The Lord is near," Paul says, and his heart sings because he knows, he's convinced, that that's always true, even in the worst of times. God is always present, and God is always faithful, even in the deepest darkness.

This is what Karl Barth meant when he called joy a "continual defiant 'Nevertheless'." He meant that joy is what we feel when we know, when we're convinced, that no matter how bad things may be, nevertheless, God is still with us, and God is not going anywhere.

In the second reading, John the Baptist is yelling at the crowds of people coming out to see him in the wilderness because he knows their faith is shallow and not sincere. They're just going through the motions. They think that being descendants of Abraham somehow makes up for all their sins. For them, baptism is not about their devotion to God. It's about their devotion to tradition. It's not about changing their ways. It's about fulfilling an obligation. It's not about being righteous. It's about looking righteous.

In John's eyes, they're all hypocrites, and he warns them that they need to "bear fruits worthy of repentance." The fact that they can trace their lineage back to Abraham means nothing to God. The only way for them to prepare for the Lord's coming is to have a changed heart. They can't just talk the talk. They have to walk the walk. They have to be generous and share what they have with people who don't have anything. They have to be honest and treat people fairly. They have to avoid selfish ambition that leads to corruption and abuses of power. That's the only way, John says, that they're ever going to be ready for the one who's coming after him. That's the only way that they're ever going to be truly prepared to welcome Jesus.

So where are you in your life of faith right now? That's the question, and Advent is the perfect time to be asking it. This is the time of year that we set aside for this kind of self-examination. Think of it as an annual check-up, not for your body, but for your soul. You don't have to put on a paper gown, and you don't have to stick out your tongue and say, "Aah." You just have to reflect on your spiritual wellness. And if anything does turn up, and

you need a prescription or some therapy, that's what the readings are for.

So let me ask you...

Are you in a place like Paul when he was writing this letter? A place where you feel stuck and helpless. A place of uncertainty and fear. A place where something bad is hanging over you—something that's looming up ahead.

If so, then you should rejoice, not because everything's wonderful, but because God is close by even when everything is not wonderful; and because you can always depend on God to support you and comfort you and get you through whatever it is you're facing, even when it's something terrible. Let your joy be your defiant nevertheless—your proclamation to the world that even when you're struggling, nothing can separate you from God; even when you're overwhelmed, God is there to calm you and steady you; even when you're alone, God sees you and loves you.

Are you in a place like the crowds coming out to be baptized by John? A place where you take your relationship with God for granted. A place where worship is disconnected from the rest of your life and divorced from any kind of ethical practice. A place where your beliefs don't inform how you actually live in the world on a daily basis.

If so, then you should repent, which sounds really awful, but it just means go in a different direction. Don't keep following the same path if it's not getting you where you want to be, if it's not making you happy, if it's not giving you peace. Find another path—one that's fulfilling, one that brings you closer to God and other people. Take the things we talk about in church every week, the things we affirm, the things we hold dear, and put them into practice. Jesus boiled the life of faith down to loving God and loving neighbor. So love God by setting aside a few minutes a day for prayer, by meditating on scripture, by listening for where God is calling you. And love your neighbor by doing justice, by getting involved

in your community, by being a friend to people in need.

This is what Advent is about—stepping back and taking a long loving look at ourselves and seeing what we need to grow in faith. So even though you're busy, and you still haven't done all your Christmas shopping, make some time for this. Just like going to see the doctor for a check-up every year, it's important, and you'll be glad you did. Amen.