



“Rejoice Always?”

Text: 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

a sermon by the Rev. Anna von Winckler

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

Today we lit the candle of joy. And the scripture in 1 Thessalonians starts with Paul telling us to “rejoice always”. What a wonderful state of existence that would be to exist in if we could live in the state of mind of rejoicing always, but how can we rejoice when life’s circumstances come to us hard and fast, when there are things that happen to us that do not create joy within?

I really wanted to give a joy filled sermon for today, an upbeat sermon, because isn’t that what we are leading up to? The joy of the Lord that came to us in the blessed form of a beautiful baby boy? But try as I might, I find myself mostly sad these days. After having lived in the West Bank for a year, after experiencing a Holy place where the veil between heaven and earth is as thin as a butterfly’s wing, I find myself grieving for the three young Israeli hostages who were around my own children’s ages who died this past week by their own country’s military; and I think of the grief their mothers must be feeling now. And I think of those images of Palestinian mothers without their children or the children without their mothers. War hurts the innocent and leaves so much suffering in its wake.

It also made me think of Mary and Joseph and the conditions that existed when Jesus was born. Mary and Joseph being forced by Roman authorities to leave the comfort of their home and village, having to leave their support system while facing the birth of their baby without the other women to be midwives for Mary. We glamorize Christmas in our pictures and songs. Mary, so angelic looking, peaceful. The light of the star. The worship of the shepherds and the Wise Men, who weren’t even there yet, fill out the creches that we put up on our mantels. But we don’t really think of the days, literal days that Mary was on that donkey to get from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Ladies, remember when you were near the time to give birth and imagine having to ride on the boney back of a swaying donkey for at least four days. It was not

an easy journey. And, then to arrive and finding no room to rent, going into labor and having to give birth among the animals. Rejoice? Give thanks in all circumstances? But this is what Paul is telling us to do. Are we really to rejoice and give thanks when we find ourselves with unexpected illnesses or coping after the death of a beloved? How are we to give praise when work is grinding us down, or when the money just isn't there to meet expenses, or when fear for the future threatens to overwhelm? But that is what Paul tells us to do - rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in every circumstance. And not only that, he then goes on to say "may your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord." On top of everything else we are to keep ourselves blameless before the Lord. We are expected to be perfect? Sinless?

But the whole of a person is what Paul was concerned about - not just one's spirit or soul or body, but all of it, the whole person. In the Scriptures and in Hellenistic thought wholeness, completeness, perfection is emphasized. For Paul, wholeness was at the foundation of his understanding of what it meant to live a good life, and abundant life. And, as is often Paul's way, the means to getting to that good and abundant life is through an unreserved and all consuming self-giving over to God.

I know we all try to live as God would have us live - loving and caring for others, worshipping God, growing in faith. But if you were honest with yourselves, how often is your mind on Christ and how often is it in the stress and problems of this world? This is not to say that we are to ignore the problems of this world, but it is to say that by giving ourselves over to God - to rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances - we will find that we become more in tune with God and better able to receive the Holy Spirit. And when that happens we can be both heavenly minded and doing the work of the kingdom here on earth.

Paul writes in Romans: I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds that you may prove what is the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Rom. 12:1-20). It is in that giving over to God in spirit and soul and body that we find that wholeness, that abundant life.

When I was in college I took a course on the Holocaust. It was not a course given by the religion department, but religion did come up. I don't remember the context in which the subject came up, but the discussion centered around those who were able to keep faith in the midst of unimaginable horror and those who gave up faith or cursed God. I remember the professor said that she would never judge those who gave up their faith. How can anyone judge when we don't know how we ourselves would fare? Rather the discussion centered more on those who were able to keep faith in those circumstances. I think it must have only been by the giving over of one's self completely to God that they were able to keep faith.

I've mentioned Corrie ten Boom before. Her book, *The Hiding Place* definitely impacted me. I think her book should be required reading for every Christian youth, because it is a book about keeping faith while living in the midst of evil. It is about sacrifice, risking one's life for others in the name of Christ, of really living out Matthew 25; but it is also a story of hope and most of all faith that regardless of the outcome of their actions to save people, death was not the end. They understood there was more to life than what they saw and experienced. For me the most impactful moment in her book was when she held her sister as she died in that concentration camp. The two sisters who had hidden Jews, who had risked their lives to save others, who now must say goodbye as one passed from this earth, kept faith in the ONE whom they had always worshipped. Corrie wrote that there was almost a glow upon the face of her sister when she died.

And that's where the good news come in. That is where we find the joy. In the midst of the worst thing imaginable, Corrie and her sister and countless others in those camps were still able to praise God and keep faith, because they were able to give themselves over wholly to God.

I remember when I was in college there was a Christian song that helped me get through a terrible time. I don't remember all the lyrics, but the woman sang that while she was in these terrible circumstance she would keep coming to Jesus, because and this is the line that challenged me as I raged at God "Where else would I go". Where else would I go. I played that song over and over again, because in the end I knew there was nowhere else to go but to Jesus, to the One who loved me, even if I didn't understand life at that moment. Jesus, the One who held me and promised me a future and a hope, as we are told in Isaiah.

Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks. We don't rejoice or give thanks because we may be in a difficult circumstance, but we rejoice because there is One who is greater than that difficulty. We pray continually because we want to be in conversation with our God and God wants to be in conversation with us. God wants to hear our hearts' woes and our hearts' joys. It is in that continual praying that our spirits stay in tune with the will of God as we work for God's kingdom on earth. We give thanks not for the challenges of life, but because God is still blessing us and has even greater blessings for us. Our present circumstance, even the present circumstance of those Israelis and Palestinians is not the end. God is there in the midst of those bombs, holding those babies in the incubators as they died, comforting the now childless mothers. We look at the horror of war, at the horror of mass gun violence not through the lens which God looks. Paul writes in Corinthians: For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am also known.

We set aside this time we call Advent to remember the coming of the Christ and to reflect on that great gift of a Godly Son, but also to reflect and anticipate the coming of Christ again. We can get through today and tomorrow and the next day with Joy and Hope, with Peace and Love, and with thankfulness when we give ourselves wholly over to God. Christ has come and Christ is coming. That is Good News! That is something to Rejoice about always. Hallelujah! Amen.



609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.fpcevv.com

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