

Philippians 4:4-7: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Dear fellow children of God;

“It’s a Wonderful Life” is a film that makes the top 10 list of most critics all-time best Christmas movies. If you’ve seen the movie, you might agree that there are really 3 parts to the movie. There’s the “wonderful life” that George Bailey enjoys from childhood right up until, through no fault of his own, he faces the loss of his livelihood and freedom and decides that the world would be better off if he had never been born. What follows is the middle of the movie, where he’s shown what life would be like for others if he would gain that wish—**what if** he had never been born. And then there’s the 3rd part, the conclusion, where he comes to the realization that no matter what the external circumstances, he does have a wonderful life.

Spending time “what iff-ing” is sometimes an exercise in futility, but other times can be very worthwhile. Today let’s ask ourselves “What if 2000 years ago Jesus had not been born? What if the true meaning of Christmas wasn’t what God has given us, but it really was just decorations and lights and presents we give each other? After all, that’s is how millions of non-Christians will celebrate Christmas this year. But for you and me, the thought of a Christmas without Christ chills our souls, because for us, Christmas delivers unique gifts that change our lives. Our theme this morning is

Rejoice, the Lord is near!

- 1. Appreciate the gift of joy**
- 2. Appreciate the gift of prayer**
- 3. Appreciate the gift of peace**

1. Appreciate the gift of joy. Our text is from Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi, a letter that is known as an “epistle of joy.” Paul says, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** And why does Paul rejoice? Was it because he was looking forward to celebrating a holiday with his family and friends? Was it because he had enjoyed a great year professionally and financially? Was it because he had enjoyed a year of perfect health? No, this epistle of joy was hardly written in what most would call ideal circumstances, yet except for a few verses, you would never guess from the tone of our text that Paul wrote these words while sitting in prison.

“I will say it again: Rejoice! The Lord is near.” What a fitting text as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior. Rejoice. Think of the hymn “Now sing, we now rejoice.” Think of hymn 45 “O rejoice all Christians loudly” and the refrain of that hymn: **“Joy, oh joy beyond all gladness, Christ has done away with sadness.”** The source of our joy? That precious Christ-child that we’ve seen in nativity scenes since our childhood...the Savior whose return Paul was anticipating.

Jesus’ return. That’s what can be challenging for us today. When Paul wrote **“The Lord is near”** he wasn’t counting down to Christmas in 61 AD. He wasn’t thinking of Christmas carols and Christmas candles and Christmas trees. He was thinking of Christ’s second return, a return even more glorious than his first coming in Bethlehem.

This morning Paul would ask us to appreciate this: As great as the joy is that we experience each Christmas, as much as we anticipate kneeling at the manger on Christmas Eve and rejoicing in the Word made flesh on Christmas Day, the thrill of Christmas 2020 will pale in comparison to the victory celebration of God’s people at Jesus’ second coming.

The world certainly doesn’t understand that. It’s no wonder that non-Christians who celebrate Christmas have such a letdown in the days that follow. For them, Christmas is a destination that marks the end of a journey that began not long after Halloween. While it’s a journey that may be marked by Christmas songs and sales and stress, it’s a journey without any mention of sin. As Christians, we have our own Christmas journeys, and that’s not all bad. Our journey to Christmas, including Advent calendars and Advent wreaths and Advent services and Christmas trees and Christmas lights can help point us to our Savior. But the difference for us is this: as Christians, we realize along

with the Apostle Paul that Christmas isn't a destination, but just one more mile marker on the journey toward our true destination: the day our Savior returns to welcome us to his side in heaven.

What a difference this gift of joy makes in the life of a Christian. Many of us here recognize that there's something more than just a little bittersweet about our Christmas celebrations or Christmas journeys, if you will. We realize that the more Christmas we enjoy on earth, the more children's services we attend of our sons & daughters and grandchildren, the more changes we see. For most of us, Christmas 2020 will be different than Christmas 2010 or Christmas 1990. If the true joy of our family Christmases was found in who sits in the pew with us on Christmas Eve and gathers around the Christmas tree Christmas Day, then many Christmases would be more bitter than sweet. Certainly in this year of COVID, we recognize that the true joy of Christmas is found not in our personal or family Christmas traditions, true joy isn't found in who is sitting in our pew or at our table or who this year is celebrating on the other side of town or the state or the country because of a pandemic. No, rather with Mary in our gospel lesson, we rejoice that the child she would bear was the Son of God and the world's Savior. And we recognize that while God-willing, the end of this pandemic may mean that Christmas 2021 will be more like Christmas 2019, we realize that because of the pandemic of sin, a disease that poses far greater consequences than masks or social distancing or respirators, there will continue to be changes in our annual family Christmas pictures. Yet our true joy is found in knowing that those brothers and sisters in Christ who aren't with us are worshipping not at symbolic manger but at a very real throne that holds our Savior. Thank God for that joy.

2. Rejoice, the Lord is near! Appreciate the gift of prayer. Paul says: **Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.** Why a text that focuses on prayer as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Savior? What need for prayer might we possibly have during this Christmas season? There is no better time than Christmas to appreciate the privilege we have in prayer...that the baby that gentle Mary laid in that manger is the reason that you and I are able to approach the throne of our Almighty God with our requests, the mediator that promises us that whatever we ask in his name and according to his will, his Father will grant. And so our first prayer might simply be thanking God that the first Christmas 2000 years ago made possible the miracle of prayer. It is because of that Savior that Paul can say *in every situation present your requests to God*. Every situation, no matter how seemingly impossible, no matter how serious, no matter how shameful, no matter how sinful. Present your requests to God, and trust that God will answer. For that gift, we give thanks.

And then once we start with that prayer of thanks it will be difficult to stop:

A prayer that

- We understand that there is no correlation between how much we spend and how much Christmas really means.
- That the stress of Christmas doesn't lead to harsh words and sarcasm that damages our relationship with those we love.
- That those who are missing someone for the first time this Christmas will find comfort in the good news of great joy that is meant for all people
- That we never take for granted our ability to freely worship our Savior when so many others around the world worship in fear.
- That our children and grandchildren never doubt that their greatest joy of Christmas isn't found in Christmas packages or Christmas movies or Christmas stockings, but in their Christ-child.
- A prayer of thanks that no matter how white or how muddy this Christmas, that no matter who makes it home or who doesn't, that no matter how good the Christmas dinner is or how awful, that no matter who is quarantined or how short-lived the thrill of the new toys; we have a Savior who never changes, who never has a bad day, is never in a bad mood and who never stops forgiving us because he never stops loving us.
- Finally, a prayer that this Christmas and in the days and weeks to follow, we appreciate God's Christmas gift of peace. (3)

3. Paul says, **And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** This is the blessing that many pastors use at the end of a sermon. What if Jesus had never been born? Then we'd have no wonderful life. Then millions sermons preached by countless pastors would be nothing more than empty words. As we look forward to celebrating another Christmas, what a wonderful blessing to

connect these beautiful words with peace that came to earth on that first Christmas Eve. “Peace on earth, good will to men” promised the angels on that first Christmas Eve, and Jesus has never failed to deliver on that promise.

Each year at Christmas the world hopes that wherever greed and hate drive people to kill each other, the spirit of Christmas would prevail and there would be a cease fire. You may well know that this actually happened in Christmas of 1914 in Flanders Field in Belgium during WWI. German soldiers climbed out of their trenches and began singing Christmas hymns. The English and French joined in and they exchanged small gifts, chocolate and tobacco. There were reports that the 2 sides even engaged in a soccer game, and that the Germans won 3-2. The peace of Christmas? There’s no denying that the truce was inspired by a desire to celebrate Christmas. Yet within a week, the two sides were again fighting a bitter war that lasted another 4 years, killed 8 million men and without another Christmas truce. Why? Because of sin.

You and I know that the babe of Bethlehem brought peace between God and man by becoming man, by becoming one of us so that we could become one with him. And we have the greatest peace man can imagine: peace of conscience and peace of mind.

Peace of conscience that no matter what sin I commit, my Savior has covered that sin. That no matter what shame I feel or hurt I have caused others, my Jesus has made me right with God. That no matter how many time I wake up in the middle of the night shuddering at the sin I have committed, that because of my Redeemer God has hurled those sins into the depths of the sea. It’s this peace with God that surpasses all of our human understanding, for it’s a peace that makes no sense...that a God to whom we had showed nothing but hate would show us nothing but love.

And because I know that this peace of conscience cost my God his only Son, then I also have the peace of mind in knowing that no matter what else I face here on earth—in this year or any other year—God is going to take care of me. That if he loved me enough to give up his own Son, then he will also along with that precious Christ-child graciously give me all things.

Rejoice, the Lord is near! This is the peace that leads us to sing:

**“The world may hold her wealth and gold;
but you my heart,
keep Christ as your true treasure.
To him hold fast, until at last,
a crown is yours and honor in full measure!”** Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Pastor David Wenzel