

Rejoice!
3rd Sunday in Advent
December 13, 2009

I invite you to open your Bible to the book of Philippians this morning. We are going to our New Testament reading in Philippians chapter 4, verses 4-8.

Philippians is the 11th book in the New Testament, so the order goes Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – the Gospels that tell us about the birth, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus; then comes the book of Acts that records the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the believers. After Acts come the Epistles, literally the ‘letters’. In light of the ministry of Jesus, and what we now understand through the power of the Holy Spirit, how are we supposed to live our lives? This is the question the Epistles answer. The order goes Romans, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians and then Philippians. Once again, we are going to Philippians chapter 4, beginning with verse 4.

The first thing you can write in the margins of your Bible is Acts 16:11-40. This section in Acts records what happened when Paul went to Philippi and brought the good news of Jesus. As a brief recap, the city of Philippi was very proud of being a Roman city, so much so that it was one of the first areas that moved away from speaking Greek – the official language of Alexander the Great’s empire that was still hanging around after hundreds of years, and started to bring Latin into more common use. What’s the big deal about that? Latin was the official language of Rome – they were really, REALLY proud of being a Roman city. Paul and his fellow missionary, Silas, were accused of trying to subvert the Roman empire after Paul drove a demon out of a young slave woman who was being used by her owners to line their own pockets. Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown in prison.

That night in prison while Paul and Silas were singing praise songs (don’t believe me, check it out in Acts!), God sent a major earthquake and the shackles fell off Paul and Silas and the rest of the prisoners, the doors were opened, and the guard was stopped by Paul from taking his own life when he thought all the prisoners had escaped. The guard took Paul and Silas to his house where their wounds were treated, and they taught everyone in the household about Jesus. By morning, the whole household, which would have included children and servants, as well as the guard and his wife, believed in Jesus and were baptized.

Another thing happened that morning, too. That morning the town rulers came to realize Paul and Silas were technically Roman citizens, and rulers and citizens of Philippi had broken Roman law by beating and imprisoning them. They were scared to death of getting in trouble with Rome, so they told the guard to have Paul and Silas leave town quietly, and that’s when Paul had just about enough. He said, “They arrested us and beat us publically, they can come and escort

us to our boat publically!” The town rulers came, and apologized to Paul and Silas. After saying their goodbyes, Paul and Silas got on a boat and left town.

The book of Philippians is Paul’s letter, written through the Holy Spirit, to the people who came to believe in Jesus. This includes at its core the guard and his household, along with everyone else who eventually came to faith. And what does Paul write to these people who rioted against him, beat him and imprisoned him? “Rejoice always!”

The word “rejoice” means to take delight in; to be excited about something. Paul reminds us here to be excited about Jesus! To be delighted in Him in all circumstances.

That’s easy enough for us to say inside the safe four walls of a church, isn’t it? But what about when we leave this place and head out into the world? How can we rejoice when we’ve lost our job, when we just got a call from the Doctor with bad news, when a loved one has passed away, when our house is being foreclosed on? Where do you even get the ability to be rejoice-ful in these times?

The answer lies in the difference between happiness and joy.

Happiness is related to what’s going on around us. Our external circumstances have a lot to do regarding how happy we feel. When things are ‘good’ in our lives, we’re happy. When things go ‘bad’ in our lives – or what we perceive as ‘bad’ – we’re not. Very often it’s the things around us: sicknesses, lost jobs, financial problems, etc., that influence whether or not we are happy.

Joy, on the other hand, is something that, Biblically speaking, is not dependant on the things going on around us. Rather, joy comes from a close relationship with the Lord as we walk in the faith given by the Spirit. *“Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”*

Joy doesn’t mean being giddy and having a silly smile pasted on our face as we skip merrily down the sidewalk singing, “Don’t worry, be happy.”

Joy means that even in the dark times, we know there is a light, even if we can’t see it just then.

Joy means that even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we know the Lord walks with us – we are not alone – and will bring us to His mountaintop.

Joy means knowing that no matter what happens in this life to us, it had to pass through the nail scarred hands of the Savior first. Remember Job – the devil had to seek permission from God before he touched God’s beloved. Are we so different? We were created, purchased, set aside and marked for eternal life in heaven, no matter what happens to us here.

Joy means we know that this life is passing, and a better one is waiting for those who call on Jesus as their only Lord and Savior.

And when we know all that, when we understand the difference between happiness and joy, then it's much easier to rejoice in all circumstances.

This doesn't mean we won't have days when we have a hard time rejoicing in Jesus. During those times of brokenness and sorrow and hurt, when we feel defeated, without joy and unable to rejoice...

We say, "I'm abandoning ship."
He says, "I'll calm your storms."

We say, "I quit."
He says, "I'll quiet you."

We say, "I give up."
He says, "I gave up My life so God the Father won't give up on you."

We say, "I'm hanging 'em up for good."
He says, "I hung on the cross for your good."

We say, "I don't have the strength to go on."
He says, "I will be your strength."

We say, "I'm throwing in the towel."
He says, "I'm picking up the towel to wash your feet."

We say, "You've seen the last of me."
He says, "You'll never be out of My sight."

We say, "It's over."
He says, "It's only beginning."

We say, "I can't take it any more!"
He says, "I can!"

We say, "I'm *not* taking it anymore!"
He says, "I Am!"

We say, "Enough already!"
He says, "I'm already enough for you."

We say, "Uncle!"
He says, "My child!"

We say, "No more!"
He says, "Know more about Me!"

We say, "I've had it!"
He says, "I have you!"

We say, "I want to hold on to my problems."
He says, "Hold on to My cross instead."

We say, "I'm gonna fail."
He says, "I won't let you fall."

We say, "I surrender!"
He says, "Yes! Surrender yourself to Me!"

We say, "It is finished!"
He says, "It is finished!"¹

His "It is finished" brings us a new beginning. A new beginning of a new relationship with God the Father untainted by sins forgiven and forgotten. Think about that! Those confessed and repented of sins are gone. You know what God says about them? In Micah 7 He says He tramples them under His feet and throws them to the bottom of the sea of forgetfulness. In Psalm 103 He says He removes them from us as far as east is from west. They are gone, and can never come back to condemn us again.

That doesn't mean whatever we have facing us isn't going to be there anymore, but it *does* mean that there is a greater *joy* to be had. A joy that can never be taken away from us as we know He holds our hands in His nail scarred hands, and will never leave us alone.

And that's something to rejoice about!

¹ From the book "Swashbuckling Faith" by Tim Wesemann, copyright Multnomah Publishers, 2006

Rejoice in all circumstances, 'cause this ain't 'it.' We were created for a place we've never seen, and it is by God's grace alone that we get there. He *promised* us, and that adds a little different perspective to the temporariness of this life.

Will you please pray with me?

Jesus, thank You for *You*. Thank You for coming and giving Yourself up for us. Thank You for promising to come once again to take us to be with You. Help us to never forget the cross or the empty tomb.

Jesus, we have to be honest, though. Sometimes life can be hard. Sometimes circumstances get the best of us, and it's hard to be delighted or excited about anything, let alone have a joyful heart.

Forgive us for letting the things of this life steal our joy. Help us to always be focused first and fore-most on You, to seek first Your Kingdom and Your righteousness.

Holy Spirit, fill us with the joy the world cannot take away. A joy that leads to thankfulness and praise; a joy that leads to settled and calm hearts and minds; a joy that never leaves despite the circumstances of this life. A joy that brings us to rejoicing!

It's in Your name, Jesus, we pray it,

Amen.