

**New St. James Presbyterian Church**  
**Third Sunday of Advent**  
**Sunday, December 15, 2024**

**“The Lord Is Near”**  
**Philippians 4:4-7**

**The Rev. Dr. David Clark**

For centuries, our Epistle Lesson from Philippians has been read in churches today, on this Third Sunday of Advent. In fact, this particular Sunday is called “Gaudete Sunday”—and that name comes from our Epistle Lesson: it begins “Rejoice in the Lord always,” which in Latin is “Gaudete in Domino semper.” So this Sunday came to be known as “Gaudete”—or “rejoice”—Sunday.

And yet, as we listen to our Epistle Lesson, it can maybe feel more overwhelming than joyful—as St. Paul confronts us with an almost overpowering set of instructions. Though it isn’t so much what he tells us to do that’s overwhelming; rather, it’s how he takes everything to a seemingly impossible extreme:

“Rejoice in the Lord always [...]

Let your gentleness be known to everyone. [...]

Do not worry about anything,

but in everything by prayer and supplication  
with thanksgiving

let your requests be made known to God” (vv. 4-6).

Doesn’t that sound somewhere between—I don’t know—exhausting and impossible? Just in case you don’t have enough to do this month, I’d also like you to show your gentleness “to everyone.” With our world seeming more and more unstable, who could possibly “not worry about anything”? And on this Sunday of Joy, does anyone really feel up to “rejoic[ing] always”? Can we even imagine—let alone practice—that kind of continuous, unending joy? What would “rejoic[ing] always” even look like?

You know, I think the idea of “rejoic[ing] always” sounds exhausting or impossible to us—partly because we misunderstand the kind of joy that Paul is talking about. There’s a very important difference between “joy” (in the sense expressed this Sunday by Paul) and “happiness” (as it’s usually understood). “Happiness” is something that can easily change: it’s a “state of contentment” (MW), a feeling that can alter from day to day. It’s perfectly normal for people to feel happy one day and unhappy another day. On the second Tuesday of September, I completed my term as Moderator of Presbytery; my happiness changed accordingly! (I’ll let you guess in which direction...) We can try, with mixed success, to be happier or more content; but sometimes external factors impact our happiness whether we like it or not. Ultimately, our happiness is impacted by circumstances; it’s changeable.

Yet joy—theological joy, joy in the sense of this liturgical date, the kind of joy St. Paul describes—“joy is something else altogether” (Evans). And in our Epistle Lesson from Philippians, Paul offers us really “a theology of joy” (Evans), a Christian conception of the

meaning *and source* of joy. Now to get at what Paul's doing here, you can think of our Epistle Lesson a bit like a tent—like an old-fashioned tent with a single tentpole that's holding everything up. Everything in this passage, with those instructions that sound overwhelming—“rejoice [...] always,” “let your gentleness be known to everyone,” “do not worry about anything”—that's all held up by one single tentpole.

So what's that tentpole? What is it that holds up all this gentleness and unworrying prayer—and, most of all, this unending joy? Well, it's easy to miss. There's a little statement tucked into the centre of this passage, a little unassuming phrase on which it all depends: “The Lord is near” (v. 5). In our translation, it's only four little words. In the original Greek, it's actually just three words: ὁ κύριος ἐγγύς (the-Lord-near). Yet it's this little phrase on which depends all the joy and possibility of this passage.

This phrase, “The Lord is near,” expresses two different kinds of nearness, two different senses of the nearness of Christ. And that's because the word we have translated as ‘near’ means both temporal nearness (near in terms of time) and physical nearness (near in terms of space) (Trenchard).

So first, temporal nearness—nearness in time—this is about the anticipation of the coming again of Christ, when Christ will at last restore this broken world, “the expectation of a temporally imminent return of Christ” (Thurston). And second, physical nearness—nearness in space—this is about Christ's nearness to us *right now*, “the Lord's ever-nearness” to us by the presence of Christ's Spirit (Thurston). So “the Lord is near” means both “the Lord is [soon]” and “the Lord is [with us]”; it means that Christ is near, both as the one who is coming and as the one who is already here.

And it's this profound nearness to Christ—Christ with us and Christ soon—this nearness of Christ is the tentpole holding up our entire Epistle Lesson; it's Christ's nearness that animates all those bracing—almost overwhelming—instructions. That phrase, “the Lord is near,” works almost like a refrain, woven through the text, energizing every verse and turn of phrase. It's like this:

“Rejoice in the Lord always;

[*The Lord is near*]

again I will say, Rejoice.

[*The Lord is near*]

Let your gentleness be known to everyone.

*The Lord is near.*

Do not worry about anything,

[*The Lord is near*]

but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God

[*The Lord is near*].”

And yet... Even acknowledging the nearness of Christ as a future promise and a present comfort—even then, I think we may still find these instructions overwhelming, especially that call to unending joy. You still might think: “Show ‘gentleness [...] to everyone’? But I already

need to bite my tongue... Don't 'worry about anything'? But there's so much to worry about... 'Rejoice [...] always'? But things are just not going well for me." We may hear St. Paul speaking of joy, and think to ourselves: 'Well, Paul, must be nice—but my life just isn't quite so rosy.'

Yet *this* is why that distinction between happiness and joy is so important. When St. Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians, when he wrote the words "Rejoice in the Lord always," does anyone remember his circumstances? Does anyone remember where he was at the time? In prison! Paul wrote this from a Roman prison! This isn't about feeling especially gentle or worry-free—or, especially, about feeling joyful because everything is going just swell. This is not about being happy because of positive circumstances; not at all! This isn't some changeable happiness that can easily "pop"—as I showed the children—when things go wrong. This is about a deeply resilient—even defiant—joy.

Was Paul "feeling happy" when he wrote this letter from prison? I really doubt it. But this isn't about happy circumstances—and nor is it about a kind of forced or phony cheerfulness. As one writer put it: "I know from growing up in the church that the exhortation to 'rejoice always' can do serious harm [...]. Too often," she says, "Christians demand of each other a [...] cheerfulness that refuses to look the complexities of real life in the face" (Thomas).

But Paul's invitation to joy isn't about happiness that changes depending on our circumstances, and it isn't about forced or phony cheerfulness: this is about joy, theological joy, the "robust" joy that comes from the nearness of Christ (cf. Thomas). Even in prison; even amid the struggles and loneliness and uncertainty that came with his imprisonment; even then and there, St. Paul announced that "the Lord is near"—and therefore he rejoiced.

Today, this Third Sunday of Advent, the Sunday of Joy—today is not about whether our present circumstances are happy: maybe they are, maybe they're not, and that'll change over time. Today, the Sunday of Joy, is about the nearness of Christ that enables us to sustain a deeper joy no matter what our circumstances may be. Today, you may be experiencing unhappy circumstances, personal struggles or worries in your life. For many people, this season can be particularly difficult—especially if you're experiencing grief or loneliness...

And yet—and yet we may discover the deeper joy that comes from the nearness of Christ. Maybe we're facing disappointments; and yet, "The Lord is near," so we know joy that does not disappoint. Maybe we're struggling with loneliness; and yet, "The Lord is near," so we find joy at Christ's presence in our lives. Maybe we're burdened by loss or grief; and yet, "The Lord is near," and nothing can take away that joy.

I said before that the phrase, "The Lord is near," is like a refrain that's woven through and animates our Lesson. But more than that, this phrase can also become a refrain woven through your life. I'd like you to try this: the next time you experience a setback, a disappointment, a loss—pause and remember, "The Lord is near"; and let that be your joy. Amen.