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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
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Philippians 4:4-7, Luke 3:7-18  
Rejoice in the Lord always

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The tone of Advent shifts this Sunday, the Third Sunday of Advent, becoming happier. We still have the penitential preaching of John the Baptist, and at times it is fierce preaching, with such sayings as “You brood of vipers!” and “even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees,” and “the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” Stern stuff! Still, I think that we also find some calmer and gentler preaching in this morning’s Gospel Lesson about John the Baptist.

As for the rest of this Sunday’s Bible Readings, they all speak of joy or rejoicing. Especially let me lift up the first verse from our Epistle Lesson. St. Paul writes this to the Philippians:

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.  
(Philippians 4:4, RSV)

Joy is so much on the heart of the apostle that he cannot rest content to speak of it but once. He invites the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord always, and right away he doubles his invitation: “...again I will say, Rejoice.”

Do you remember the story of the apostles Paul and Silas singing their hymns in the nighttime in the prison? The apostles had reason enough to be miserable. They had been beaten with many stripes, cast into the inner prison, and their feet had been made fast in the stocks. Yet, at midnight, they sang their hymns. Acts 16:25 speaks of the joyful witness of Paul and Silas:

<sup>25</sup>And at midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them. (Acts 16:25, KJV)

Let us note that this praying and praising took place in Philippi. Now, the apostle who back then had sung his praises to God while in the Philippian prison writes from another prison and urges the Philippian Christians to join him in rejoicing, always:

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.  
(Philippians 4:4, RSV)

Paul’s prison this time is perhaps in Rome, perhaps Ephesus. In any case, he writes to the Philippians as a prisoner, but being a prisoner does not dim his spirits. I like to imagine a guard looking on at St. Paul as he sits in his cell and

writes to the Philippians. “Does he not look content,” the guard wonders to himself. “Does not the man understand that he is in a prison. There is no guarantee of release. It is a terrible thing being in this prison, yet look at Paul. He has a smile on his face as he writes his letter.”

And it is true that Paul had no guarantee of release from his prison. In his Epistle to the Philippians we catch glimpses of Paul’s acknowledgement that death might be at hand for him. But he somehow seems perfect calm in face of that possibility. He is willing to entrust himself over to Jesus come what may:

<sup>21</sup>For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (Philippians 1:21, KJV)

Paul seems to believe that *in Christ*, he cannot lose. His faith makes him brave. His faith makes him calm. He does not know how many days he has left to him, but he means to use *this* day for some good. So he writes his affectionate letter to the Philippians, to encourage them and to help them as best he can.

You would never guess that the man is a prisoner as he writes. He is a happy man – including a happy man as his thoughts move over the miles to the church in Philippi:

<sup>3</sup>I *thank* my God upon every remembrance of you, <sup>4</sup>*Always* in every prayer of mine for you all making request *with joy*, <sup>5</sup>for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now; (Philippians 1:3-5, KJV)

Paul is a happy man, in spite of all the troubles he has been through. He once listed those troubles in his Second Letter to the Corinthians. It is a remarkable list of blows to try to weather:

<sup>24</sup>Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. [I note that some people died under those thirty-nine lashes. Paul went through them five times!]  
<sup>25</sup>Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup>on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; <sup>27</sup>in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. <sup>28</sup>And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches. (2 Corinthians 11:24-28, RSV)

But the blows of life have not spoiled the spirit of Paul. Though he is in prison, he writes to the Philippians and encourages them always to rejoice. There is something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ that lifts up the heart of Paul, and he wants this for the Philippians. He wants it for you and me too. In all circumstances, he invites us to take thought of Jesus and to lift up our hearts:

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.  
(Philippians 4:4, RSV)

Now, let's turn to the sometimes fierce, sometimes calm preaching of John the Baptist in this morning's Gospel Lesson.

I have long been intrigued by how gentle and practical the preaching of John becomes when he turns to particular groups within his congregation. So, tax collectors, for example, ask him what they should do to get ready for the wrath to come, and John's answer to them is entirely sensible and commonplace:

<sup>12</sup>Tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, "Teacher, what shall we do?" <sup>13</sup>And he said to them, "Collect no more than is appointed you." (Luke 3:12-13, RSV)

That makes sense. That seem right.

Likewise with the soldiers:

<sup>14</sup>Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what shall we do?" And he said to them, "Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:14, RSV)

Again, this is good, traditional counsel:

And to everyone, John urges that we be people of compassion:

<sup>10</sup>And the multitudes asked him, "What then shall we do?"  
<sup>11</sup>And he answered them, "He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise." (Luke 3:10-11, RSV)

This is not unusual preaching. After all the fire and thunder and lightning of John the Baptist's preaching about the coming kingdom of God, when it gets down to practical day-by-day life, John preaches like the most humble parish pastor. The fiery preacher becomes calm and almost everyday. He preaches according to the age-old piety of Israel. He calls for justice and compassion in the people.

And this seems right to me. John the Baptist has gone as far as he can go at this point. There is nothing more specific he can preach until that great scene where he points to Jesus and transfers people over to him:

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith,  
Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the  
world. (John 1:29, KJV)

From this point on, it should be with John exactly as he says it must be:

He must increase, but I must decrease. (John 3:30 KJV)

In pointing people to Jesus, John has sent them to the One greater than he is, whose sandals he is not worthy to stoop down and untie (Luke 3:16). It is finding this greater One that gives peace and joy and courage.

St. Paul met this Greater One on the road to Damascus, and it made all the difference in life for him.

You too have met him. He introduced himself and gave himself to you in your baptism.

Now, in this Sunday's reading from Philippians 4, St. Paul would have us know that we have not understood Jesus aright if we have not yet understood that to have Jesus in your life is a reason to have joy in your life:

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.  
(Philippians 4:4, RSV)

Please understand me, my brothers and sisters: It is not always an easy thing for a pastor to exhort his congregation to rejoice. That is because every call to rejoice reminds us of the opposite — of all the disappointments and troubles this world contains. The apostle would have us rejoice in the Lord in full face of such troubles. St. Paul certainly knows what he is talking about. He faced troubles enough in his own life, yet remained fundamentally a person of good cheer. Now he calls us to good cheer too. But it is not always easy, not always automatic.

Earlier this past week, in the prayers during the midweek liturgy, I included a petition for poor people at Christmas time:

Comfort people who will go without gifts during this  
Christmas season, especially the children, and give them  
much better days in the future.

We are so sad at that reality, I know. We are sad at the reality that there will be people going without gifts this Christmas, including children. Now, St. Paul would have me turn around and say to them, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice!" This is a call to joy that goes beyond this world's reckoning. Perhaps it is

the children who understand it best. I am not to say to them, “Rejoice in your poverty,” but rather “Rejoice in the Lord.” Rejoice that Jesus was born a poor child in a manger in Bethlehem. Rejoice that Jesus was a poor man with nowhere to lay his head. Rejoice that Jesus is risen from the dead with all the power and wealth in this world. Rejoice that Jesus knows you and your life, and he means to make things better. He means to make them eternally better.

Yesterday I mentioned to Barbara Chomko, who is the Chair of our Board of Deacons, that in 2016 I hope we can restructure our benevolence contributions to include support for what is called “The Lutheran Counseling Center” here in Metro New York. It is a great resource for pastoral counseling in a world where many people are struggling with depression, grief, loneliness, perhaps even thoughts of suicide. It is hard for a pastor to say to such struggling people, “Rejoice in the Lord always, Again, I say rejoice.” And no pastor or pastoral counselor would ask people to pretend that life is not hard. But St. Paul is right that even struggling people deserve some hope in this world. Even struggling people deserve the good news that Jesus is a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, but that he is risen from the dead and is on their side. All suffering souls deserve to know that life is better than it looks precisely because Jesus lives and gives us reason for some joy that surpasses human understanding.

Be brave, be good, and be joyful, then, even you who have suffered deep blows in life. This is Advent. We are on our way to celebrate the holy Incarnation of God, who has become a human being like us, plunged down into the depths of human disappointment, but who lives now to make things better — even to grant us one day joy everlasting, through the grace and merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.