Philippians 4:4-7

REJOICE! DO IT RIGHT!

1. In the Lord
2. In your life

Studies have shown that the holiday season has a profound effect on people’s mental health. In the days leading up to December 25th, fewer and fewer patients were admitted into psychiatric hospitals. But as soon as the holidays were over, the numbers immediately increased in dramatic fashion. It appeared that most had been determined to participate in the celebrations of the season. Once they were over, however, they were looking for help.

Perhaps the holidays had not lived up to their expectations. Maybe a renewed antagonism with a family member or acquaintance ruined it. Perhaps the memories of holidays gone by were not fulfilled by the present day holidays. Maybe the carefree celebration of others only served to emphasize the unhappiness they had always felt. At any rate, the wards would fill up with sad and depressed patients.

No matter what the reason might have been, it seemed if they, like so many others, placed a great emphasis on celebrating the festivities of Christmas, while neglecting to secure the real joy contained in the event of Christmas. They thought that eating and drinking, caroling and decorating, shopping and receiving gifts, would bring them happiness - enduring happiness.

When it did not last, when it turned out that food was just food, when the Christmas carols got tiresome, and gifts no longer thrilled them, they had nothing left to hold on to and depression set in. In other words, they only went half-way in their celebration of Christmas. They concentrated on just a part of the holiday - and the most minor part at that - and so they missed out on the fullness of Christmas joy.

This morning, as we look forward to Christmas, let’s not make the same mistake. If we are going to celebrate Christmas, then let’s celebrate it all! If we are going to DO IT, then let’s DO IT RIGHT! Let’s not cheat ourselves out of Christmas joy that lasts a lifetime! Following Paul's command in our text, let’s Rejoice!, that is, let’s not merely strive to be happy this Christmas but forever joyful!

To be sure, we can enjoy the parties and the family dinners. Enjoy the music and decorations of Christmas. Enjoy gift giving and receiving. Enjoy all the trappings of Christmas. They all make this one of the happiest times of the year. But let’s not stop there! As Paul says: Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let's rejoice with a joy that cannot be surpassed and will never end.

Did you catch what Paul said? He did not say Be happy. He said: Rejoice. That does not mean we walk around with a silly smile plastered on our face all the time. Joy is not the same as happiness. And he did not just say: Rejoice always. He said that we’re to rejoice in the Lord. To rejoice in the Lord is to rejoice in who he is and in what he has done. To rejoice in the Lord is to rejoice that he promised to send a Savior to save us from the hell that we deserved because of our sins. To rejoice in the Lord is to Go to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing. It is to put aside for the moment our sufferings and our sorrows and Come adore on bended knee Christ the Lord the newborn King.

Now, you can carry to Bethlehem some of the things that bring you sorrow. You can bring your weaknesses, your failures, your sins. Bring them and then leave them there with that Savior who has been born to us. We leave them with Christ the Lord, knowing that one day that perfect baby is going to be a perfect adult, a perfect human being who will then take our sins upon himself and be put to death on a cross to satisfy the wrath of holy God over sin.

That is the sort of rejoicing – rejoicing in the Lord, in his goodness, in his forgiveness.
- that we can do always. When December 26th comes, you will not have to wait another 364 days to have cause to rejoice. God's mercies are new every morning, and therefore we rejoice every morning.

In fact, we can rejoice every minute because, regardless of whether it was a physical or emotionally pleasant or unpleasant minute, it was a minute that has brought us a little closer to the time when we will meet our Maker. And we know that we will meet him covered in the perfection which Christ granted us through his perfect life in our place. We know that we will not only meet our Maker, but that we will live with him forever.

How can we do that? Paul's answer is short and sweet: The Lord is near. Paul was talking about just one of the Lord's comings. But in our situation, we can take his words with a double meaning. Our focus is first of all on the coming of the Baby born of Mary, laid in a manger in Bethlehem. It is hard to imagine a more joyful occasion than the arrival of God's Son as a human being!

It is mind-boggling that the Creator and Master of the universe would take an interest in such insignificant beings like you and me! How amazing that the One who fills all things would be so humble that he would confine himself to the phy limitations of a man! It is astounding that the Lord would not only take an interest in our needs and become one of us, but would love us enough to come to earth as our Substitute!

That is what we find in the manger! We find Eve's Offspring who is Immanuel, God with us, sent to rescue sinful mankind. We see the One who will destroy the power of sin as he faces the wrath of God that we deserve. In this new-born Child, we see the One who will die in our place. He is the One who came from above to do everything necessary to give us a place with him in heaven. The birth of Jesus brings us nothing but joy.

And it is this joy that allows us to focus on his second coming with even greater joy. The Lord is near! He could return at any time. Then we will be with him forever and ever. In him we face the day of judgment with no fear of God's wrath or condemnation. We look forward to the day of our death without any terror of the hell that lurks beyond it. His coming then brings us nothing but the purest joy! Ours is a joy that surpasses all joy! The Lord's coming is worth celebrating in any way imaginable. So, Do it, but Do it right! Celebrate with all the Christmas hoopla, but celebrate in a way that transforms fleeting happiness into eternal joy!

First of all, Paul says: Let your gentleness be evident to all. Gentleness here means kindness, tolerance, a willingness to yield. You have been given something that fills you with great joy. It is much too good to keep to yourself - you must let others know you have it! In the Babe of Bethlehem, you have a Savior from sin, death and hell! Your sins have all been forgiven! You have a place with your Lord in heaven!

All of this is the free gift of God! The Lord has lavished his love upon you. Now, it is your turn. Now, you have the opportunity to make that obvious to everyone. You have lost that hard-edged view of life that makes it necessary to care only for yourself at the expense of everybody else. You can lavish love on others because the Lord loved you first.

In Christ Jesus, God sees you not as you are. He sees you as being just as righteous and holy as his one and only Son, even though you are not. Now you can look at others that way - not with all their faults but with the grace God has bestowed upon them - grace which you share! You can be forgiving.

You have joy - a joy which you can pass along. You can wish others a Merry Christmas! not merely Happy Holidays! You can explore the fascinating gift of giving - not only to family members or people to whom you owe a gift. You can help the poor and needy who will never have a chance to pay you back. If you think you cannot find joy in living this way, then try it. It is the way the Lord lives and it works for him! It is a way you can celebrate
the Lord’s coming all year long!

Secondly, Paul says you have a very personal joy in the Lord's coming. When you live in him, then the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. God is love. He has proven his love in many ways. He has given you every spiritual and earthly blessing you have - everything you need and a lot of what you want.

So, in him you have the gift of peace. This is not an worldly peace between warring neighbors. It is not a peace in which you get along with everybody. The Lord offers you a peace with him that infiltrates everything you have and are, everything you do. It is a peace so tremendous we cannot comprehend it. Such a peace guards your very life, your innermost being, your very self, with the knowledge that God loves you.

The Lord is on your side. He looks out for you night and day. He always acts on your behalf, defeating all enemies that may threaten your joy in him. And you are certain of that - not because of anything you have ever done or because you wish it were so. You are confident because of what Christ Jesus has already done for you! He has done it all to make your life forever secure - be it here and now or then and there!

All that leads to not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. In the peace of God, you can put all your worries behind you. You do not have to obsess about any thing any longer. The Lord will take care of you as he always has.

Should anything trouble you, simply bring it to him - whether it is big or small. No matter what it is, he invites you to bring your fear to him. He will listen. He will consider your problem from all angles. He will answer your prayers and petitions in the way that brings you greatest blessing, even if you cannot see it. Then your prayers of thanksgiving will rise before the Lord as sweet-smelling incense!

Imagine! The Lord does all this for you by his coming – first as the Baby Jesus, then as the Judge of all mankind. That, my dear Christian friends, is joy that extends far beyond December 25th, a joy that cannot be exceeded, a joy that cannot be taken from you. Rejoice! - and do it right! Amen.

Pastor Keith Bilitz
St. John Ev. Lutheran Church, Alma City
Trinity Ev. Lutheran Church, Smiths Mill