

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The second stanza to Joy to the World ends with these well-known words: “Repeat the sounding joy.” Again and again, we say that phrase three times. It’s a Christmas staple. Joy has come, and we can’t help but repeat that joy over and over and over.

But is it always easy to rejoice, especially in a season of the year where we are busy, stressed out, emotional, and burdened? As I look at my calendar for the month of December, a skeptical part of me makes the wisecrack, “Where will I find time to rejoice with so much going on?” And I know many of you have busier schedules than I do. Some of you are about to embark on that great journey of baking cookies for hours every day. Some of you are going to spend the month planning the family get together, making sure the meal is perfect and that the presents you buy are just right. Will there be family drama? Some of you would say it won’t be Christmas without it. All of this can make this season of joy feel a whole lot more like a jaunt through a mine field. You look forward to what’s to come, but the road there will be stressful.

Can we hit pause on all the planning and worrying for a second, though? Can we just spend a few minutes hearing the word of our God, because he has something to say to us as we face this uphill climb: “Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice!” This is not a call to unrealistic cheerfulness. It’s an invitation to revel in the fact that Christ our King comes near to us.

The church in Philippi was not doing well. They faced pressure from outside the church, but they also had issues inside the church. God’s people were worried. They were discouraged. And even more than that, they were letting petty disagreements steal their peace.

Though we hate to admit it, maybe our church feels like that sometimes. Do we have worries? Who doesn’t? Do we get discouraged? Of course, because life doesn’t always go the way we want it to. And do we let petty disagreements steal our peace? Let’s not pretend that everything is always hunky-dory between God’s people who gather here.

But Paul speaks with urgency: “The Lord is near.” Christ could return at any moment, and these are the things his people are worried about? They’re worried about their little squabbles at church, those words somebody said offhand years ago that started a fight? They’re letting church politics dominate, categorizing people as enemies and allies? Scoff at it if you want to,

but we let stupid crap get in the way of what is supposed to really matter. And we become obsessed with this foolishness. We let depression and anxiety own us, so much so that we're not just afraid to gather with our brothers and sisters at church. We're afraid to even open our Bibles and let our King speak to us. When you're in the midst of the worries and oppositions, it makes all the sense in the world that these are the battle you need to be fighting, but when you take a step back and hear what Paul has to say, all those things look so petty and shallow, distractions that do a great job in keeping us from rejoicing.

Isn't this the devil's gameplan? If he can make you think about that person at church you don't like, if he can get you to seethe every time you have to see them in church, he steals your joy just like that: "Don't focus on Jesus. Focus on Ralph in the next pew over." And if he can make your worries consume your life, he'll leave you with no room for rejoicing.

Paul knew there were a lot of hearts not resting on Christ because they were so caught up in all the stuff of sin and destruction. Our harshness toward others, our bitterness about the situations of our lives, our anxious attitudes toward seemingly everything, and our short tempers toward each other reveal that our hearts are not always resting on our Savior.

I'm sure almost everybody has experienced it. The whole family is at home to celebrate Christmas, when a fight breaks out. The teenage sons start bickering, or somebody brings up a topic they should have known was off-limits. And now the celebration is ruined. Amidst the yelling, a voice of reason cries out desperately: "Can you just stop! It's Christmas!" Can't we say the same thing when we let worries and petty anger get in the way of the joy we have when our King comes near? "Can you just stop! The Lord is near!"

So, what is Paul's prescription for a joyless existence? What does he have to say to us when life feels too busy or too confrontational or too anything? He tells us that the Lord is near. He certainly came near to his creation in the past. The God of the universe wanted to be near his sinful people, so he became flesh in order that people could see his face without being overwhelmed to death by his holiness. And our fleshly God did the unspeakable. He died for us to take away our sins. There it is! In the past, he came near so he could save.

But he comes near us now too. He speaks to us in his word. It's why we respond to God's word read at church with "thanks be to God" and "praise be to you, O Christ." God is speaking to us by his word. And to make his presence with us known even more, he comes to us in water and word at baptism, creating faith and stamping us as his rescued children. He comes to us in bread and wine, which are also miraculously his body and blood, to face us again to the cross of Christ and receive the forgiveness of sins he won for us. There it is again! In the present he comes to save.

But he will come again. This Advent season is a season for waiting. We join the believers of the Old Testament waiting for the Savior to come, but we await his coming again, that day

when he will bring us home to heaven. This is what Paul is talking about as he warns the Christians in Philippi to put behind them all the pettiness and empty worry of life. Our God is not far away he is near. Once more, there we see it! In the future, he will come again to save.

And as we think about the theme of this Sunday, “Imminent Arrival of the King,” and the Gospel of Jesus entering into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, we’re reminded that Jesus does not come near to us as a distant or out-of-touch king. He beckons us into his chambers. He invites us to stand before his throne and come to him with every prayer and concern and hurt. He is not far from us sinners.

How does that not bring joy? How does that not uplift our church even in the midst of struggling and infighting? Repeat the sounding joy, again and again, through the good times and the bad, to drive away our worries and assure us that he will take care of us.

So, as Paul says, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” His nearness to us produces a different response than the hurting of our world. The good news of Jesus makes us more patient with others. How much more will you put up with a difficult person when you remember how deeply loved by God they are? It might make you more willing to listen to their long, drawn-out story for the fifteenth time, the one you could probably tell to them better than they tell it to you. It might make you more willing to forgive the outbursts or those words said with little regard for how they are received. The good news of Jesus that we celebrate makes us more humble too. Maybe you spend more time thinking about others and less about yourself, because you want everyone to know the hope that you have in the Savior and the comfort that only comes from the cross. And the good news of Jesus gives us a new sense of confidence. The gospel certainly makes you more comfortable in your skin, because your success or failure in life doesn’t depend on your wealth or your job or your family. You are a child of the King, and that’s the best thing you can be.

As we lift our eyes from ourselves to Jesus, we are free to live with heavenly calm even when life is not calm. We have a joy that’s not based on how well the Christmas cookies turn out this year or how the kids and grandkids react to the gifts you buy them or whether or not your uncle can keep his mouth shut long enough to keep from starting family fireworks. Our Savior is near, just as he has been and just as he will continue to be. Our King sits on his throne, so don’t let worry and bitterness ruin your celebration. Repeat the sounding joy, with your voices and in the way you live wrapped in God’s grace. Amen!