

REJOICE IN THE LORD

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Grace Church in New York
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Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4:4)

These familiar words from Paul's Letter to the Philippians have brought to my mind the great Russian novelist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Leo Tolstoy. At one point in his life Tolstoy wrote a spiritual autobiography, entitled *A Confession*. It's a short, easy, rather riveting read in which he explains how he rejected God early on in life. The loss of faith didn't seem to bother him. By the time he was fifty years old he had already written the works that would earn him literary immortality. He also enjoyed every other blessing the world can give: fantastic wealth, a loving wife whom he loved in return, children whom he adored, personal strength and vigor. He had every reason to rejoice, but he could not rejoice. He could not shake the notion that his life had no meaning that death someday would not destroy.

In *A Confession*, he used the following fable to describe how he came to view life and existence. A traveler in the countryside is overtaken by an enraged beast. To escape the beast he climbs into a well, and holds onto a branch growing through a crack in the bricks. He looks down and sees at the bottom of the well a dragon that has opened its jaws to swallow him. He can't go up because of the enraged beast. He can't go down because of the hungry dragon. So his eyes focus on the branch to which he clings. Now he sees two mice – one black and one white – running round and round the branch, gnawing at it and weakening it with each turn. The traveler knows that soon, either the branch will break, or he will have to let go of it from exhaustion. He will fall. In the meantime he sees a few drops of sweet sap oozing from the branch he holds, so he reaches with his tongue and licks the drops. Tolstoy concludes:

So I too clung to the twig of life, knowing that the dragon of death was inevitably awaiting me, ready to tear me to pieces; and I could not understand why I had fallen into such torment. I tried to lick the sweet sap which formerly consoled me, but the sap no longer gave me pleasure, and the white and black mice of day and night gnawed at the branch by which I hung ... I only saw the inescapable dragon and the mice, and I could not tear my gaze from them.

Toward the end of his life the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi, and the letter contains some of the most familiar phrases in the Bible: *Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything ... And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.* What is this peace of God that passes all understanding, and apparently passed by Leo Tolstoy? What is this joy in the Lord that would allow us not to worry about anything? Here we are on December 16th, and it seems to me that most people would benefit from a large helping of it. Whatever it is, you have nine days left to find it, including today and Christmas Eve. The mice on the branch go round and round.

So I ask you: how is your grip on the twig of life? How are you doing in your quest for the elusive joy everyone is looking for at this time of year? Have you bought the perfect gifts for all those imperfect people on your giving list? Are all the gifts paid for, and if not, do you know how you will pay for them? Have you negotiated which relatives will be coming to stay for the holidays, and for how long? How about the tree and the cards and the cooking? Feeling any pressure? Are you staying one step ahead of the flu?

For me this month it hasn't been the flu that's made me blue, but a mere head cold that turned into full-blown laryngitis. You should have heard me at the Community Carol Sing on December 5th. Actually, you should be glad if you didn't hear me. The choristers processed into the church singing "Once in Royal David's City." Their voices were pure and sweet. They sounded like angels. Then it was my turn to read the Christmas Gospel, and my voice, by contrast, sounded like a bucket of gravel being poured into an empty metal dumpster. I love the Advent and Christmas carols, but until today I've been silenced. Even now the high notes are hard to reach. Laryngitis is but a slight, momentary affliction that doesn't compare with far heavier burdens I know others are carrying: a serious illness, family strife, the death of a loved one. Then consider the sad divisions in our national life, the fetid values of celebrity culture, and the violence in our society. When you add it all together a buoyant spirit is not the result. These all silence our rejoicing more effectively than any head cold. So I ask again: how is your grip on the twig of life?

The question brings me back to Paul's lofty words: *Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything.* Most often it seems as though these are nice thoughts, but not really attainable after all. Perhaps the word "always" is the problem. If you take enough multiple choice tests you learn to beware of the word *always*. Paul didn't mean *always*. He used the word *always* because what he really meant was, Rejoice in the Lord *sometimes*; perhaps even *very often*. But surely he could not have meant *always*. Make a note of this: *Always* is the word that Paul wrote and meant. *Rejoice in the Lord always*. But who did Paul think he was? Didn't he understand that life and all of its hardships gets in the way of rejoicing? Yes, he did understand. And he had the requisite scars to write with credibility the words, *Rejoice in the Lord always*.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians he wasn't exactly trapped in the shaft of a well, but he was confined in a Roman prison where he was awaiting trial. The charges against him had been deliberately orchestrated in Jerusalem. But rather than taking his chances with the corrupt court there, Paul appealed to Caesar in Rome. So he was sent off to Rome and was shipwrecked on the way. Paul was a man who cared little for creature comforts, but shipwrecks and prison and the hampering of his missionary efforts had to make life difficult even for him. Yet still he was able to say, *Rejoice in the Lord, always. And again I say, Rejoice.* This tells me that the peace of God that Paul speaks of transcends our present, outward circumstances. It is not controlled by externals. It doesn't rise and fall with how well or how badly your day or your life happens to be going. Tolstoy had everything going his way, but he still didn't have the peace of God. So no matter what the circumstances of your life – no matter how much you have, no matter how little you have, no matter who is in your life, no matter who isn't in your life – you can have God's peace and joy.

The peace of God transcends not only a difficult present, but also a painful past. What was the enraged beast that chased Tolstoy into the well? Part of it was guilt over the way he'd lived in the past. He looked back with regret on the people he'd killed as a soldier in the Russian army. He looked back with regret on the arrogance of his teaching career. People find it difficult to rejoice because they look back with regret on the sins and offenses of their youth. Paul, too, had a past that he easily could have looked back upon with regret, and stewed over for the rest of his life. Prior to his Damascus Road conversion, Paul was a zealous Pharisee involved in the hunting down and rooting out of Christians. He approved of and presided over the stoning and killing of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Imagine the potential for such a brutal crime to burden Paul's conscience in his later years. Imagine the mantle of guilt he could have carried on his shoulders. Yet still he was able to say, *Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say, Rejoice.* This tells me something else: that the peace of God which passes all understanding is able to transcend the sins and the regrets and the heartaches of anyone's past. What a shame it is that we often continue to condemn ourselves for the sins of our youth long after God Himself has

forgiven us. God's grace is this: no matter where you have been or what you have done, you are not exempt eternally from experiencing God's peace and joy.

If we are to take Paul seriously, then we must conclude something more: that this joy and peace of God are able to transcend not just our present circumstances and our guilty past, but even the prospect of a bleak future. Paul was not a young man when he wrote to the Philippians. With his trial delayed indefinitely, he must have suspected that he would never leave his prison. To the best of our knowledge, he never did. When Tolstoy looked ahead all he saw was the dragon of death waiting to annihilate him. But when Paul looked ahead he saw Jesus waiting to welcome him. Therefore he was able to say, *Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say, Rejoice.* This tells me something even more: that the peace of God which passes all understanding is available to us no matter how short, or grim, or uncertain our future is shaping up to be. So *do not worry about anything*, is what Paul went on to say.

Good for Paul. Bravo to him. So glad to know that he was able to get on with life without worrying. What about poor Leo Tolstoy hanging in a well? Was Tolstoy ever able to find the peace of God, and rejoice in the Lord? The truth is, he was. For him it was a lifelong struggle that finally bore fruit. Two words that I find in today's readings might fairly describe how Tolstoy found his way back to God. They might help us find our way, too.

The first word is repent. Did you hear in the Gospel reading (Luke 3:7-18) how John the Baptist angrily charged the people to bear fruits worthy of repentance? Then person after person came up to him and asked, "What should I do?" What John had to say bore little resemblance to what we usually think the word repentance means. Instead of telling the people to go make groveling apologies, John told them to make simple, concrete changes in their lives. Those with two coats could repent by sharing with those who have none. Those who have food could repent by doing the same. Tax collectors and soldiers could repent by going about their business honestly. Likewise Tolstoy came to realize that the meaning of life lies in simple acts of doing God's will: supporting life and providing sustenance for all. When he saw the simple Russian peasant people whom he'd disparaged living lives more meaningful than his, he knew it was time to repent. He knew it was time to change. We don't like to hear it, but repentance is a prelude to rejoicing.

The second word is one that we have a difficult time translating into English. In Paul's letter today it has been rendered as gentleness, as in *Let your gentleness be known to everyone.* Other versions of the Bible translate this word as "moderation," "softness," "kindness," "reasonableness," and "mildness." Sad to say, moderation and gentleness and softness are not qualities that the rugged, shoving, driving cultures of the world seek to instill in us. Instead of moderation we think joy is to be found in the uncompromising extremes. Instead of gentleness, we think joy is to be found in competitiveness. Instead of kindness, we think individualism will lead to rejoicing. Tolstoy came to realize these attitudes that characterized his life and the circle of his friends were poisonous to joy and peace. He realized true greatness was to be found in simplicity, goodness, and truth. So he embraced faith, returned to the church, and sought to outdo others in works of kindness and gentleness. He found himself walking in the footsteps of Christ, along the pathway to God's peace and joy.

Good for Leo Tolstoy. Congratulations to Paul the Apostle. Now how about you and me? Would you like to receive the peace of God that passes all understanding? It's really as simple – or as complicated – as this: Bear fruits worth of repentance. Let your gentleness be known to all. Gentleness and repentance are two Advent words that can disperse the gloomy clouds of night, and lead us home, singing as we go: *Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!*