

ARE YOU A WORRIER?

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Grace Church in New York
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Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything. (Philippians 4:4-6).

When I was growing up in New Jersey, on many a Saturday my mother would walk us to the nearby town center for shopping and perhaps lunch. One day we noticed a sign in a storefront window declaring that if you bought something inside you could also buy a raffle ticket. The winner of the raffle would have a face-to-face meeting with Tom Seaver, the ace pitcher of the New York Mets. We were big Mets fans, so my older brother leaped at the chance and I went along. Who wouldn't want to meet Tom Seaver?

Almost immediately I began to worry – not that we would lose, but that we would win. You see, somehow I got it into my head that Tom Seaver would come to the house of whoever won the prize and spend the day. It would be up to you to entertain him. I was about 8 years old at the time. What would I say to Tom Seaver? What would I do with him? Suppose he wanted lunch. What would I feed him? Suppose he wanted to have a catch. No way could I handle his 100 mph pitches. My overly active imagination was envisioning every worst case scenario. The whole thing was going to make Tom Seaver terribly angry, and he would drive back to Shea Stadium ruining the day he agreed to be part of the raffle. It would jinx his whole season, doom to Mets to years of futility, and it would be all my fault. The more I thought about it, the more worried I became.

As luck would have it I did not win the raffle, and if memory serves, I never learned if anyone even did. So you can't blame me for the years of Mets' futility that would come to pass. But I will never forget the dread in the pit of my stomach. Every time the phone rang might have brought news that Tom Seaver was coming. Or worse yet, the doorbell would ring and there he would be!

Do you tend to be a worrier? If so, you might be interested in one of today's Scripture readings. Toward the end of his life the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi. The letter contains some of the most familiar verses of 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 which passes all understanding? What is this joy in the Lord that would allow us to rejoice always? Whatever it is, you have thirteen days left to find it, including today and Christmas Eve. How are you doing in your quest for the elusive joy everyone is looking for at this time of year?

With all due respects to St. Paul, it's easy to conclude that the world today presents us with more cause for worry than for rejoicing. Just last Thursday the veteran news anchor, Brian Williams, on his last broadcast before retiring, signed off with ominous words: *For the first time in my 62 years my biggest worry is for my country. I believe in this place, and in my love of country I yield to no one. But the darkness on the edge of town has spread to the main roads and highways and neighborhoods. It's now at the local bar and the bowling alley, at the school board and the grocery store. Grown men and women who swore an oath to our constitution ... have decided ... to burn it all down with us inside. That should scare you to no end.* Williams was lamenting that

a dark spirit of extremism and division capable of hobbling the country is not just coming, it's here. The doorbell has rung and there it is.

Meanwhile, foreign powers perceive a vacuum on the world stage and are moving to fill it. The Russians have amassed 100,000 troops on the Ukrainian border, and the Ukrainians for good reason are worried that an invasion is coming. The Chinese increasingly exert brash territorial claims over the South China Sea, and the Taiwanese are worried that an invasion is coming. These are flash points that easily could escalate into conflicts that would engulf the world. "That should scare you to no end." So we worry. We worry for our children and their future. What sort of country and world will they inhabit?

This brings us back to St. 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 sit for enough tests in school 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*, even *frequently*." But surely he could not have meant *always*. Make a note of this: *Always* is the word that Paul wrote. *Rejoice in the Lord always.* But who did Paul think he was? Did he know what it was like to face the overwhelming might of a foreign power? Did he ever face a life-threatening illness? Did 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 was not in a place of ease and contentment. He was confined to 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. He was sent off to Rome and shipwrecked on the way. Paul was a man who cared little for creature comforts, but shipwrecks and prison 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 joy in the Lord 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. You can have the peace of God and joy in the Lord 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.

Joy in the Lord transcends not only a difficult present, but also a painful past. 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 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 joy in the Lord 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 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 joy in the Lord is 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. Yet he was able to say, *Rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say, Rejoice.* This tells me something even more: that joy in the Lord 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. *The Lord is near*, he added.

The Lord is near. Indeed, a quiet trust in the proposition of God's near presence was the foundation of St. Paul's joy. An awareness of God's close companionship was why he could rejoice in the Lord always, and urge us to do the same. St. Paul knew that neither tribulation, nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor peril, nor sword could separate him from the love of Christ. In my better moments I have known this, too. Yes, I was an anxious kid. Minor concerns could escalate into major league worry. But along the way, through participation in the life of the church, I decided to trust the message that God was for me, not against me. Over time, what replaced any lingering, low-level dread in the pit of my stomach was God's personal, living, loving presence: searching me out, knowing me, being acquainted with me and all my ways. To quote the Psalmist, *such knowledge is too wonderful for me.* It was a gift from God, and to this day it causes me to rejoice in the Lord. Though I confess I am still working on the *always* part.

Do you tend to be a worrier? Joy in the Lord is on offer today. It is a gift from God, but how can you receive it? Let me offer you two words for Advent, based on today's readings, to help open your hands so you can accept what God wants you to have. The first word is repent. Did you hear in the Gospel reading how John the Baptist angrily charged the people to bear fruit that is worthy of repentance? Person after person came up to him and asked, "What should I do?" Once John got past the bluster of his unquenchable fire and winnowing fork, his reply bore little resemblance to what we usually think the word repentance means. Instead of telling the people to go make groveling apologies or burn down their whole lives, John told them to make simple, concrete changes. Those with two coats should repent and share with those who have none. Those who have food should repent and do the same. Tax collectors and soldiers should repent and go about their business honestly. What do you think John would have told you? Repentance. Turn to a better thing. We don't like to hear it, but the truth is this: 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 are not adjectives that would describe our society these days. 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 meanness will lead to rejoicing. Guess what? It's not working! These attitudes are poisonous to joy. It seems to me that the loss of gentleness or moderation in our culture is what Brian Williams was lamenting in his farewell on Thursday, and the whole world is paying the price.

Joy in the Lord can be ours. Therefore, repent and embrace the moderation that beats the darkness back to the edge of town. The peace of God can be ours. Therefore, repent and practice the gentleness that disperses the gloomy clouds of night.

The Lord is near, so do not worry about anything. In fact, you can rejoice in the Lord always. And again I say, Rejoice. You can let your gentleness to be known to everyone. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.