

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

In the name of our coming Savior, dear friends,

This time of year is certainly joyful, wouldn't you say? People are singing and humming their favorite Christmas tunes. There's good cheer in the air. If you watch for it, you won't only see the guy at the mall wheeling in to take the parking space you were waiting for—with your turn signal on! And you won't only notice the people out shopping who are oblivious to everyone around them—and who are blocking your way in the aisles. No, if you watch for it, you'll see some people smiling more than usual—at total strangers. I bet a few more doors get opened for others and more happy greetings are exchanged on sidewalks and in the check-out aisle. Joyful stories start to interrupt the usual litany of tragedies and gloom on television news shows. As if teenagers needed another reason to act a little goofy, they take the season as an opportunity to throw a Santa hat on and smile and wave to people they don't even know. There's an extra measure of happiness and joy during these days prior to Christmas.

Life in the church is no exception. Did you know that historically this very Sunday of the Church Year is called *Rejoice Sunday*? It's traditionally been known by its Latin name, *Gaudete Sunday*. We have a *Rejoice Sunday* in order to capture our growing anticipation of our Savior's coming to us. The good news of our Savior's coming at his birth and the good news of our Savior's coming to take us to be with him in heaven causes Christian people to rejoice!

And what better words for a Sunday like this than the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians—a letter which is sometimes called the Epistle of Joy?! God's Advent message through Paul is unmistakably clear today: **REJOICE, THE LORD IS NEAR!** And there are three important parts to this message:

- 1. GET RID OF ANXIETY SO YOU CAN REJOICE!**
- 2. LET YOUR REJOICING BE SHOWN IN THANKFUL PRAYER!**
- 3. REJOICE IN THE HEAVENLY PEACE THAT IS YOURS!**

So anxiety, thankful prayer, and heavenly peace are the things that we want to consider when it comes to our rejoicing.

I know we just counted many ways that we see joy during this season, but it's also true that there is anxiety out there, isn't it? Maybe you're feeling the stress that an even fuller calendar brings. Or the pressure to buy just the right gifts for people. Or the year-end deadline for work or for tax-related items. It's even possible that these kinds of things have just piled onto a whole year's worth of worries and tensions.

But this is Advent—a time to REJOICE because THE LORD IS NEAR! It's pretty hard to do that if we allow ourselves to be loaded down with worldly worries. Paul urges us: **The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything.** If we let our faith and our joy

be choked by life's worries, we are forgetting that our Lord is near right now—he is with us always. He is here to help us and do what is best for us and he works through our troubles for our spiritual good. And during Advent, we're reminded that our Lord's return is near.

It is wrong, it is sinful when we allow life's stresses to shift our focus from the reason for this seasonal joy—a celebration and a remembrance of Jesus' birth, his entry into this world to save us from sin. We don't then pay attention to the way he comes to us through his Word and the Sacraments of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper. We aren't then thinking about his coming again to judge all people and take us to be with him in heaven. How silly of us to let worry get in our way. It's worse than silly, it's really sinful.

The blessing is that you and I can repent for those sins of anxiety. We can express our sorrow over them to Jesus and be determined to make efforts to stop our worry and increase our trust in God. Rejoicing follows our repentance because we know that when we repent our Savior forgives. The sins are gone as if they never happened. What could ever give us better motivation to rejoice?!

The baby, whose birth we celebrate soon, lived and died for you to free you from your sin, to rid your life of anxiousness and worry and stress—and not just the holiday kind, but all kinds. Jesus said so simply in Matthew 6 , **Do not worry about your life (v.25)** and he went on to talk about God caring for our everyday needs and how much he loves us. How could we let worry cause us to doubt our God's love and care? He proved to you that he loves you when he sent his one and only Son to die for you; he will certainly care for your everyday needs. When you receive blessings like that from the Lord—forgiveness of sin, your every need supplied, the comfort of his love and care—the result is a heart that is full of the rejoicing Paul encourages here.

To be really crass—and I feel almost Scrooge-like or Grinch-like saying this—our Christmas lists are really selfish, aren't they? My Christmas list is all about *me*. It's what *I* want, what *I'm* looking to get from other people. It's even possible that I receive a number of gifts for Christmas, but if I don't get what was on my list, I'm actually upset! Maybe some of you kids remember feeling like that before even if you never said anything to your parents about how you felt. It usually takes some growing up to realize how blessed we are already and that earthly gifts are nice but they won't fill the empty spots in our hearts and lives. Those are filled by our Savior Jesus and a mature Christian knows this and rejoices over all Christ has done for them and continues to do for them every day of the year, not just on Christmas.

And the rejoicing Christian shows his or her joy in thankful prayers to God. These prayers look a lot different than a wish list of things we want to receive. Paul says **in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God**. These thankful prayers praise God for his goodness. A thankful Christian knows that the God who has supplied all his needs both physical and spiritual is the loving

God he can go to with all kinds of requests and needs. But these are presented to God with heartfelt thanks and with an understanding that they are not demands, but the humble requests of a child to their Heavenly Father. The Lord is near enough right now to hear and answer these thankful prayers and requests in the way that is best for our souls—and he will do it. You don't have to guess what the believer's response is to that, do you? We can't help but rejoice.

You know the end to that favorite Christmas hymn, Silent Night: *“Sleep in heavenly peace, sleep in heavenly peace.”* We're singing about the baby Jesus, that *“Holy infant so tender and mild”* sleeping in heavenly peace, but you do realize that you have true HEAVENLY PEACE *because of* Jesus, right? HEAVENLY PEACE came with his birth, it came to you by the Holy Spirit through his gift of faith bestowed upon you when you were baptized or when you heard the saving gospel proclaimed, it came to you with Christ's promise of a heavenly place just for you.

HEAVENLY PEACE, the **peace of God, which transcends all understanding**, is a peace that—well, there is nothing else in all the world that compares to it. This peace of God actually **guards our hearts and our minds** like a soldier keeping a VIP safe from danger. And you have this peace right now! When a person knows for certain that Christ's death paid for their sin and the Father wipes our slate clean because we trust in his Son, there is peace. When a person knows that death is not the end, that we have nothing to fear, that Jesus' promise will come true and we will see him face to face and enjoy eternal life with him, there is peace. It is a peace that is beyond comprehension. It's the kind of peace that makes you feel sorry for people who do not have it, who do not know that God loves them and that he gave his Son for them. It is an amazing, life-altering peace—a HEAVENLY PEACE.

REJOICE, THE LORD IS NEAR! Paul's message reminds us that Jesus' return to this world could come at any time and when he does, he will call you and me to eternal HEAVENLY PEACE. The warranty on any Christmas gift you receive this year has a time limit. Why even a Lifetime Warranty has an expiration, doesn't it?! There is no warranty, no guarantee in this world that can compare with the guarantee of God that your HEAVENLY PEACE is an eternal peace. It is good now in this lifetime and it's good forever! Now, you tell me—what emotion does that evoke in a Christian's heart? That's right, JOY! The good news of a Savior from sin who is near us and eternal life in heaven is cause for rejoicing. Advent joy is as good as Christmas joy...and Easter joy—it is the joy of a Christian every day of their life.

Paul encourages us today with this happy message **Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!** Why? Because of our Advent reminder that THE LORD IS NEAR—near to you now because you are dearly loved by him, and his 2nd coming is near as well. Rejoice, Christian friends, every day until your day of great rejoicing arrives and goes on for all eternity. Amen.