

**Third Sunday in Advent – December 16, 2012**  
**Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church**

*Pastor Charles Heup*

**Philippians 4:4-7**

**Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! 5) Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. 6) Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. 7) And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**

Dear Christian Friends:

When my daughter was still a toddler we had a little game that we'd play. She would tell me to panic about something – like the fact that she still had her jim-jams on. And so I'd get real excited and talk real fast about how she was still wearing her pajamas and she'd laugh and laugh. The more excited I got the more she laughed. As soon as I would stop she would tell me to do it again.

One evening when I was getting ready to go to church for the Monday evening service, Joanna asked me if I was going to panic about Jesus again. Apparently she had noticed that I had gotten a bit excited in the sermon on Sunday. Now I suppose that there might be some people who might panic about Jesus – especially if they could be convinced that the Lord is near. But as our text for today reminds us we don't have any reason at all to panic about the fact that the Lord is near. In fact his nearness is the basis of the comforting Advent message for today:

**Theme:** The Lord is Near!

1. He fills us with joy.
2. He removes our anxiousness.
3. He guards us with his peace.

The Apostle Paul was quite fond of the little group of Christians in Philippi. This was the first Christian congregation in Europe. Paul together with Silas, Timothy and Luke went there after the Holy Spirit had sent Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia begging for help. Acts 16 tells us about the events in Philippi: the conversion of Lydia, the confrontation with a slave girl who was possessed by a demon which allowed her to predict the future and her owners who became upset with Paul for casting out the demons and ending their business as fortune tellers; the beating and arrest of Paul and Silas, the earthquake at night which opened the prison doors, the conversion of the jailer and his household. Due to the circumstances Paul and Silas moved on quickly while Luke and for a time Timothy remained to nurture that small congregation of Christians.

But that wasn't the end of the relationship that Paul enjoyed with this congregation. While he lived among them, Lydia had kindly opened her house to him. When he moved on to Thessalonica the Christians in Philippi supported him generously. They gave beyond their means when Paul gathered an offering for the poor in Jerusalem. Now Paul was imprisoned in Rome and once again it was the Philippians who went into action. They gathered a gift for Paul and send it along with Epaphroditus whom they instructed to stay and attend to Paul's needs. It's no wonder Paul called this congregation his "joy and crown."

This entire letter is really an expression of the joy that flows from the Gospel. Paul wrote about joy in Christian living, the eternal joys which are ours because of Christ, the joy of being content in this life no matter what the circumstances because we are confident that the Lord is near and watching over us.

Throughout this letter Paul has sounded the drum beats of joy – and now those beats reach a crashing crescendo as Paul writes: **Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!** Always, in everything, rejoice in the Lord – no matter what the circumstance – Paul says it again: Rejoice!

Now wait just a minute you might be thinking. How can a person rejoice in the face of unemployment, sickness, family problems, financial difficulties, the stress of trying to balance our jobs and our families, the anxiety of Christmas being just a little more than a week away? Paul knew about those kinds of troubles – he’s writing this letter from a prison cell – he’s facing an uncertain future. And yet he wrote this epistle with a song in his heart and words of praise on his lips.

Rejoice – that’s the word that captures our attention. That’s the word we stumble on and over! But let’s not overlook the source of our rejoicing. Rejoice in the Lord, Paul says. And then he repeats the thought: The Lord is near. And when the Lord is near he fills us with joy. And because the Lord is always near – well there’s always reason for joy.

It’s not that we don’t feel the pain, the stress and the burdens of life. It’s not that we don’t hurt when we or those we love are in difficult situations – it’s that the Lord is near in each of those situations. He’s there with his forgiveness; he’s there to assure us that we are his brothers and sisters. He’s there to point our thoughts heavenward to the eternal glories he has purchased for us with his blood. He’s there to remind us of the sacrifice he made for us – the same sacrifice Paul mentioned in his letter to the Romans: (Romans 8:32) **He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all--how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?** And then Paul continues in Romans: (Romans 8:35-39) **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38) For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39) neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

No matter what the circumstances we have the joy of salvation, the joy of forgiveness, the joy of knowing that all things work for the good of those who have been called to love the Lord, and the joyful assurance that the Lord is coming again to give us full possession of the glories of heaven. The Lord is near.

With those words we are not only reminded of the Lord’s presence in our lives through his Spirit but our attention is directed toward his impending return. The Lord is near – in a sense those words are even more true now, 19 centuries after Paul wrote them, than they were at the time they were written. By God’s way of looking at things the return of the Lord has been and always will be near. Christ could call any one of us to himself at anytime. Christ could return in glory to bring the history of this sin filled world to an end. With those thoughts in mind we will realize that life is too short to waste time with loveless and joyless bickering. That’s what Paul had in mind when he wrote -- **Let your gentleness be evident to all.**

The Lord is near – he fills us with joy. The Lord is near – he removes our anxiousness. **Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.**

Don’t let yourself be pulled in several directions at once as if by worrying and fretting about all those things you’ll somehow be able to take care of them all by yourself. Don’t panic – not even about not being ready for Christmas. Don’t panic about anything. Through Paul God tells us to worry about nothing but to lay all of our concerns at his feet. Notice God doesn’t tell us to sort things out first, laying the big stuff at his feet and hanging on to the little stuff for ourselves. No God says: **in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.**

When I look at my life it seems like I've got a tendency to panic about all kinds of things – and now I'm not talking about the games I might play with my daughter. There's so much to worry about in life; isn't there? What will we wear, what will we eat, what will we drink, what about my body, what about my life? The Lord Jesus knew that litany of worries – worries which are common to man and he put those worries all into perspective with the question: (Matthew 6:27) **Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?**

And Jesus didn't worry about hurting our feelings when he addressed the cause of the worry either. He calls attention to the Lord's gracious provisions for the grass and the flowers and then asks: (Matthew 6:30-34) **If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?**

There's the reason for worry – a lack of faith, a failure to place things into God's gracious hands. After pointing out our sinful lack of faith Jesus continues: **So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32) For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33) But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.**

Now let's be careful that we don't misunderstand what the Lord is telling us in these sections of Scripture which encourage us to set aside anxiety and to look to the Lord in prayer. He's not forbidding us to make plans or to think ahead. He's not suggesting that we stop working and start praying instead. He wants us to use forethought and common sense to meet the various challenges and problems he sets before us in life, but in all our working and planning and thinking ahead he wants us to lean on him – never forgetting that everything depends completely on his will and blessings. And so with child-like trust we will commend ourselves and our concerns to him in prayer. And as we pray we can do so with thanksgiving confident of the Lord's answers and blessings. What more capable hands could there be for us to place our concerns?

The hymn-writer's encouragement: "Take it to the LORD in prayer," so eloquently reminds us of our Lord's invitation and the encouragement Paul sounds in our text.

**Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere?  
We should never be discouraged -- Take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Can we find a friend so faithful Who will all our sorrows share?  
Jesus knows our ev'ry weakness -- Take it to the Lord in prayer.**

**Are we weak and heavy laden, Cumbered with a load of care?  
Precious Savior, still our refuge -- Take it to the Lord in prayer.  
Do your friends despise, forsake you? Take it to the Lord in prayer.  
In his arms he'll take and shield you; You will find a solace there.**

**What a friend we have in Jesus, All our sins and griefs to bear!  
What a privilege to carry Ev'rything to God in prayer!  
Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear,  
All because we do not carry Ev'rything to God in prayer!**

The Lord is near – he fills us with joy, removes our anxiousness and he guards us with his peace. **And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.** The Philippians were used to the sight of Roman centuries standing guard over their cities. Many of the citizens of that city had formerly been soldiers themselves who had been given land and special political privileges in this Roman colony. Paul was all too familiar with the ever present guard that stood watch over him. Using those pictures Paul assures us that the peace of God will surround us and be present with us always.

We may not always see those who are helping to keep our cities and homes safe and secure – but there is a peace that we enjoy once we're back on familiar territory and in the comfort and security of our own community and homes. But that peace is nothing in comparison to the peace which only the Lord can provide. God's peace is the only peace that counts. It's beyond the grasp of our human intellect because it originates in God's divine wisdom. It's the peace that is revealed to us in the Gospel. No reason or strength, none of our choosing or doing can provide the serenity that is ours through faith in Christ Jesus. This peace comes to us only through the Means of Grace: the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. It's the peace that God brings to us along with the water of Baptism. It's the peace which God re-enforces through a regular use of his word. It's a peace which is given to us again and again each time we partake of the Lord's Supper. It's peace with God – a peace which he established and paid for with his Son's life who gave his body up in death and shed his blood for the forgiveness of our sins. This peace watches over our Christian existence and life. It keeps the cares of this world from corroding our hearts. It's a peace granted and guaranteed by our Lord. The peace which guards our hearts and lives keeps us clinging to Christ enabling us to stand confident in the hour of trial and temptation.

Whether it's the fast approaching Christmas celebration or something else that is weighing heavily on our hearts and minds don't forget

The Lord is Near!

1. He fills us with joy.
2. He removes our anxiousness.
3. He guards us with his peace.

Amen.