

Sermon Text: Philippians 4:4-7

Occasion: Third Sunday of Advent, 12 Dec 2021

Joy in an Anxious World

Grace, mercy and peace be to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Php 4:4-6)

As you may know, the third Sunday of Advent is dedicated to joy in anticipation of the joy we experience when our Lord come in the flesh. For this reason, the colour of the season shifts from blue—which is the colour of hope—to rose, a warmer colour used to express joy. There is much joy as we contemplate how our God is with us in this world. That is the entire point of our hymn of the day, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Emmanuel means “God with us” and we rejoice in knowing that our God is dwelling among us. When our Lord clothed himself with flesh to be born on Christmas Day, he literally embodied the joy of our Lord for he brought the blessing of salvation to us. Around the manger, Mary, Joseph, and a host of others gazed on the baby born in Bethlehem and basked in the promises of God. The joy of Christmas is having our Lord comfort us with his blessed presence.

And we need this joy. The world into which the joy of Christ comes is not a perfect world. It has been so harmed by sin and its effects that there are evils lurking within hearts, within powers, and within nature itself. The joy we hope to possess is not a joy coming from a fallen world but the joy of heaven, embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. This is the true comfort and blessing of Christmastide, but there are also unwanted anxieties that arise from this world.

Most years, the anxieties rampant around Christmas are about having enough time to do Christmas shopping or baking. There are concerns about trying to fit everything you want in a neat little schedule. Sometimes there is a worry that your budget might be spread too tight to acquire the gifts you would like to give, and there is also the dread when you second-guess what on earth present you should get. These are the normal anxieties, to say nothing of the other difficulties that plague us this year...namely a plague.

I believe many of us hoped that COVID would not be a factor in holiday preparation this year. And because of a new variant in circulation, we have to adjust restrictions yet again. The weather doesn't help the situation either. Thanks to excessive flooding, the coming Christmas season looks uncertain in various ways. Thankfully the stores have restocked themselves for the most part so we shouldn't be short on too many Christmas goodies, but we also recognize that festivities for many in this province will be significantly altered by flooding and landslides.

And, also, many of us are anxious about who we will be able to see at Christmas. There are a number of reasons why we might not be able to get into contact with people at this time of year. In past years, it was because schedules don't line up or arranging transportation is too difficult. This year you might be considering seeing fewer people in person because of COVID or not travelling because the roads won't permit it. Perhaps the worst anxiety about meeting people comes with remembering those who are incapable of being present anymore. I am talking about loved ones who are passed on who cannot take part in the festivities in their usual way. Christmas can be a time of great sadness for mourners.

Despite Jesus Christ present with us being an amazingly joyous thing, there are anxieties around celebrating this on Christmas. The hope and joy of the Christmas season lies just in front of us now—there is less than two weeks until we peer over into the manger and see our loving Lord come into this world. Knowing the salvation of the world is right there in front of you and promising to you every gift of God should make your heart ecstatic but, if your mind drifts to your anxieties, your joy might feel diminished and fleeting; like a candle caught in the wind and rain struggling not to be blown out.

Oddly enough, this is how Christian joy usually is experienced. The joy of the Christian faith is never celebrated in a perfect world or even a mediocre one for that matter. Rejoicing in our faith is always done in a world filled with anxieties. It is not until we pass from this worrying world that we will be free from its evils. When Paul writes to the Philippians, telling them to rejoice, Paul is writing from prison. He's not in some wonderful seaside resort with every whim fulfilled. He's stuck in prison not knowing if he will ever get out. This should drive up his anxiety level but Paul simply rejoices. He is not rejoicing on account of him being in prison—that would be crazy. Like you, Paul wants to be beside his loved ones—the Philippians—and to love them in person. Rather, Paul is rejoicing because whether he's behind bars or free to join the Philippians in person, the Lord is with His people, giving to them blessing.

The joy we possess is knowing and experiencing God with us—Immanuel. Because Jesus came into this world on Christmas Day, you have the assurance that our Lord has come into His creation to bless you with his salvation from the anxieties of this world. Your joy in the faith is not that you are free from all anxieties but that you possess Christ in the midst of every anxiety panicking your heart. Our God has come alongside you who are in misery that He might share in your misery. When St Paul encourages you to rejoice, he is saying to rejoice *in* the Lord. We are in the Lord when we are in the faith receiving the blessings of Christ: his love, his life, his forgiveness, and his salvation. Jesus is here amongst us so we might be blessed through him. We rejoice not because we have sufferings nor because of the simple fact that we have God on our side. We rejoice because God is with us and promises to overturn the anxieties of this world.

If you are anxious about anything at all—and there is much to be anxious about, pray unto the Lord your God. He is here for you. He made sure that He would come into our midst on Christmas Day in the manger, and He is making sure that He stays with us through all time. The Holy Spirit cleaves to your body to make it His temple. The Spirit continuously blesses you

through Christ by always leading you in the faith to your Lord. If there is anything you need, you can bring it to the Lord who is always and evermore here with you.

Are you worried about the usual stress of the holiday season? Bring it to the Lord in prayer. Pray to the Lord your God that you are unsure of what to do or how to do it, that you don't know if the expectations set for you are too demanding. Request from Him patience and peace that you might conduct yourself well at this time and serve people in your midst with all reasonableness and love.

Are you anxious about the unusual stresses of the holiday season? Bring it to the Lord in prayer. Beseech Him to put an end to the pandemic and all its complications. Request strength for getting through all the annoyances that plague you as you try to keep up with all the necessary precautions. Be a blessing to others by praying for the health of those who are affected, the comfort of those who are mourning lost loved ones, and the upholding of all medical personnel who are tired from working so hard the past two years.

And are you anxious about the absence of those you wish to be present on Christmas? Are you anxious about those to whom death has drawn near or to whom death has already come? Bring your sorrow to a loving Lord who wishes to comfort grieving hearts with the promise of the resurrection. Ask Him for peace, for patience, and for the ability to let out your tears. Request the presence of caring people to cradle your fragile heart as it breaks so you may not be alone this Christmas. May your heart be pieced together by the love of Christ and his care through his people.

Our true joy is knowing that our God is with us and listening to every prayer. Not just when everything is going smoothly, nor when everything is perfect. Our joy is knowing that Jesus Christ is with us when we need him the most, when we need anxieties calmed and our lives brought to peace. For this, we can be thankful. Indeed, although we pray out of worry and anxiety, yet can we be thankful to our God. He has come to us, descending from the heavens above to be born on Christmas Day that we might have his joy in our midst—in our hearts, and in our minds.

Ever since the blessedness of Christ has entered into our hearts and minds through the word of God and the waters of baptism, the salvation of our Lord has been at work within us. The Gospel of our Lord lives here in His Church where He delivers us from the evils of this world into newness of life. This is always true, even when anxieties seek to rip our hearts and minds from our Lord. He promises to strengthen and guard our hearts and minds in himself. For this purpose, he came into the world. We are not overcome by the world for Christ himself overcomes the world (John 16:33) and gives the victory to us (1 John 5:4-5). The joy of the Lord is with us always and we can rejoice always for he does not leave us. Your God is with you. Amen.

The peace that surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.