

REJOICE ALWAYS, PRAY WITHOUT CEASING, GIVING THANKS IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES; FOR THIS IS THE WILL OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS FOR YOU.

Maybe you have noticed this morning that we lit the pink candle on the Advent wreath. We lit the pink candle on this 3rd Sunday in Advent because this is Gaudete Sunday. “Gaudete” is a Latin word that means “to rejoice,” and takes its name from the words of Paul, “REJOICE ALWAYS.”

“Rejoice always” – that can be easy thing to do. Especially, when there is something to rejoice about – like when you nephew or niece is getting baptized, the kids are coming home for Christmas, a child or grandchild is engaged and wedding bells will ring in 2018, the MRI shows no cancer, your team wins. Rejoice always, that is an easy thing to do when there is something to rejoice about.

But, what about when there isn't always something to rejoice about, like when bad things happen. You have the biopsy, and the doctor calls and says, “Something just isn't right.” Age and infirmity have taken their toll on a parent or spouse, and you are looking at celebrating this Christmas as your last one together. Or, you are already looking at celebrating Christmas alone, because death has taken your spouse from you. Your brother / sister called. Yah, they were having problems and fights in their marriage, but now it's divorce. Your child, oh no, he / she and their family won't be coming for Christmas, because the last words you heard from them were, “I hate you”.

How do you rejoice always when there is nothing to rejoice about? When life is really, really bad, and the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death overwhelms you?

And, Paul says you are to “pray without ceasing” and “give thanks in all circumstances”. Sounds like a good slogan, doesn’t it? Make a good bumper sticker, right? But, what about when things are serious, bad, and you’ve prayed and prayed, and prayed some more in the midst of sickness, hurt, rough times, and nothing seems to happen? Does Paul really mean that we are to pray to God something like, “For these bad days, for this divorce, for this sickness, for this impending death, we give you thanks, O Lord”?

Look at the words of our lesson. Paul says that we are to “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you”. Are these some “pie-in-the-sky” dream of Paul? Are we supposed to put our game face on and be happy? Are just supposed to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and when life give us lemons, we are just supposed to make lemonade?

No, far from it. What Paul is doing is directing us to Christ. Paul knows all about life’s ups and downs. Look at his own words,

Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches (2 Cor 11:24-28).

Paul knows all about life's ups and downs, but he also knows Jesus. Look at his words in our lesson this morning, "for this is God's will IN CHRIST JESUS FOR YOU".

Your life is lived in Christ Jesus. He is the author and finisher of our faith. We live and move and have our being in Him. It begins with Him. It ends in Christ.

The night of His birth, an angel appeared to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, "I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Lk 2:10-11). That is news of great joy FOR YOU, Dear Child of God. Jesus is born for you and for your salvation. The very Son of God came down from heaven and was incarnate, made man, and born of the Virgin Mary. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God's will. Because you didn't live a life of perfect obedience to God's will, Jesus took your will upon His own flesh, went to the cross, suffered and died for you. He took from you all the times you had broken God's will and put what you wanted before what God wanted for you. But, because He did that, you are forgiven all your sins.

And, He rose again the 3rd day to defeat your greatest enemy, death itself, so that not even death and the grave and hell have any victory over you.

And Christ Jesus gives you all that forgiveness, all that life, all that victory, all that joy to you when you are baptized. For you are baptized into Christ Jesus. That means you died with Him to all sin and ungodliness and you rose to a new life in Christ. The life that you live in the flesh of your earthly body, you live by faith in the Son of God, who lived for you and gave Himself for you (cf. Ga. 2:20).

His promise to you is “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Mt 28:20b). Christ attends you in all the circumstances of earthly life, in every joy and sorrow, so that you can “rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances”. You can do that because your ability to do God’s will, to live a Christian life, is not found in you. It is found in Christ Jesus. Remember, you live in Christ and Christ Jesus lives in you. He is your constant source of joy – forgiving you your sins and pointing your heart to the joys of heaven to come. Silencing all the devil’s ugly accusations against you. He gives you strength so that, in Him, you can do all things. He works patience in you, so that you can bear up even in tribulation and as we live under the cross.

And, He all of that because Jesus comes to you, to abide with you, in the hearing and learning of His Word and the eating and drinking of His Body and Blood in the Sacrament of the Altar.

As we walk by faith through this vale of tears, the hope God gives us is that the coming of the Messiah to deliver us from this valley of the shadow of death. As we walk by faith, we hear the words of Paul, “He who calls you is faithful; He will surely do it” (v. 24). God is faithful. He who began faith in you so that do trust, rejoice, and find comfort in Jesus, will keep you “spirit and soul and body blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 23).

We wait, and as we wait, we REJOICE ALWAYS.