

## Rejoice

The third week of Advent is upon us. The rose-colored candle has been lighted, many of us have done our Christmas decorating and are doing what we can with whatever holiday traditions we can manage. Candles and cocoa have been deployed. And still the world grows darker, as we move nearer to the winter solstice. An enormous snowstorm, they say, is on the way. The COVID map of Virginia is mostly red. Our political scene is -- well, I don't have an adjective for it, not even one of the unprintable ones. We will not be able to worship in person on Christmas in the usual manner, crammed into bright candlelit sanctuaries stuffed with poinsettias and French horn players and fidgety children. Most of us will not gather with extended family. Some of us confront illness, unemployment, or even death.



That's the way things are.

And, our ancient lectionary (and our Advent wreath traditions) tells us, "Rejoice!" Most years, we just -- rejoice! We acknowledge that some people are having a "blue Christmas" and make space for them, but the dominant mood is merry. This year, it just sounds -- well, exhausting, like we are supposed to "fake it till we make it," and we were done with that sometime around the Fourth of July. We need the treasure hidden in these texts, usually overlooked, but ours to excavate. We need something that feels like more than just going through the motions.

There are keys in this week's readings from Isaiah and John, but it's Paul who says, "Rejoice!" in the present tense:

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. [i]

Behind the greeting-card sentiment, there's a small church in conflict, whose future is uncertain. They've written to ask the bishop - well, the apostle - to speak to the vestry and straighten it all out. Paul isn't writing a Christmas sermon; he's writing in response to people who are frustrated and upset. Paul gives some advice and some encouragement about the specifics, and then he says: most importantly, rejoice. Rejoice because Christ has risen from the dead. The rest comes and goes, but hope cannot be killed -- though politicians and mobs and priests tried, and good people ran and hid. God had the last word. Rejoice, and (continues Paul) behave like the bearers of that really good news:

Try to get along with each other. My friends, we beg you to warn anyone who isn't living right. Encourage anyone who feels left out, help all who are weak, and

be patient with everyone. Don't be hateful to people, just because they are hateful to you. Rather, be good to each other and to everyone else.[ii]

One optimistic letter to a fledgling church is good, but it's not what makes Paul inspiring in these times. It's that he sticks to this theme, playing variations on it over and over, in very challenging circumstances. It is not the optimism of a beginner; it's the wisdom of one who has endured, and for years. From an imperial prison he later writes to the Philippians in almost identical words,

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, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.[iii]

Paul acknowledges in the letter that his joy is not the result of comfort and plenty in the moment:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. [iv]

From his cell, in this same letter, Paul uses the word "rejoice" seven times. And the same expression, the same admonition, comes up in his final letter, written in Rome at the end of his career and his life. in anticipation of his execution:

Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.[v]

I commend all of Chapter 12 of the letter to the Romans to you - a template for how to live the Christian life in times of imperial madness and chaos. But for this Third Sunday in Advent, the point is this: "**Rejoice**" points to **hope**, not to current material comfort or pleasant times. "Rejoice" is Paul's persistent reminder that our present troubles, in any time, are not the final story. "Rejoice" is Paul's shorthand for, "Yes, I am sorry for your pain. I feel it, too, believe me. But -- Christ rose from the dead! Rejoice!"

These are the days for remembering that God delivers us in ways we cannot imagine, let alone predict. God comes among us in a workingman's family in a town people laugh at. God uses feisty teenage girls to bring his justice and mercy into the world. God brings sight to the blind, sound to the deaf, words to the mute, justice to the prisoner, mercy to the marginalized. As his mother will sing next week, the Lord brings down the haughty from their thrones and fills the hungry with good things. And best of all, we are all invited into the project.

Where is our hope? Our hope is in the name of the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth, and he is about to be born - in Bethlehem, in Nazareth, in Rome, in

Richmond, in Nomini Grove. If you can remember to leave your heart open -- in you.

It's not just a rose-colored candle. It's the way things REALLY are, if we have eyes to see it.

Every blessing in this crazy, confusing, holy season. May God's love invade your heart, your home, your life, keeping the flame of hope burning brightly in your soul through the dark of winter and into the promise of springtime in this life and the glorious habitations of light in the next.

Faithfully,

Bishop Jennifer Brooke-Davidson

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[i] Thessalonians 5:16-18 NRSV

[ii] Thessalonians 5:12-15 CEV

[iii] Philippians 4:4-9 NRSV

[iv] Philippians 4:11-13 NRSV

[v] Romans 12:12. NRSV