

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

From our second lesson did you hear the Apostle Paul say “Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances...” Paul is writing instructions to believers in Thessalonica, he is instructing them on the behavior for Christians. Which brings up the question, have you ever wondered how you as a Christian are supposed to behave?

Rejoice always, pray ceaselessly, always be thankful. Uffda! Tough to do sometimes, even during this festive time of year when it seems that sometimes being grumpy might be the best you can do. The cares of the world, the cares of the season seem to interfere at times with our walk as disciples. You may not be rejoicing out there in the world and you might not feel like rejoicing even in our worship. So again I repeat: rejoice always!

Seems like you’re hearing, and saying these and similar words all through our worship today. In our first reading from Isaiah the prophet says “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord...” in our responsive reading of the Psalm we said together “Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” We heard read “...and we rejoiced,” and “...shouts of joy.” Then we read together again “...shall come home with shouts of joy.”

And soon you will hear me say in the Preface to Holy Communion that “It is indeed right and salutary that we should in all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, O Lord, holy Father, almighty and everlasting God.” Even our communion liturgy seems to repeat that refrain from St. Paul’s command to the Thessalonians and to us: “Rejoice always”.

As hard as it might seem at times, even in times of grief and great sorrow, there is in our hearts a reason for rejoicing, for praying, for giving thanks. That reason is there even when we don’t realize it or when we don’t want to realize it. Riots, protests, drought, flooding, mudslides, war all over, rejoice you say? You must be joking!

But something happened a couple thousand years ago. In our gospel this morning we have John the Baptist testifying to the light, answering the Jerusalem priests and Levites’ question asking him who he was, by saying “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’” Our Lord, the light that came into our world, born to a teenage mother named Mary who in the words of the Magnificat sang “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” Unwed teenage girl about to become a mother even though she had never known a man, and her spirit rejoices in the words of the angel. The baby, our Savior, changed everything, reframing human reality. Our Savior, anointed by the Father, brings us good news, he binds up our broken hearts, and frees us from captivity, releasing us from the prison of sin. By the gift of grace through faith, the gift of the Holy Spirit, we are lifted up and made strong even in our weakness, our despair turned to rejoicing, because the truth is, the grief we feel, the despair at our world

around us, our fears and concerns, all the rest of it, none of this, no!, none of this will have the last word. We are experiencing the labor pains of creation as during this season of Advent we await the Lord's coming. This in no way minimizes the suffering, sorrow and sadness we feel at our own situations and those of the world around us, but all of this is reframed in the coming resurrection of the dead, and life eternal with Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

This is the promise we have received, given to us in our deepest need, and soon we will know his love as we join together at our Eucharistic table in Holy Communion, tracing the cross from the waters of our baptismal font as we come forward.

AMEN