Always? Really?
Scripture: Philippians 4:4-7 and Luke 3:7-18

FOCUS: We are to rejoice always and to worry about nothing. If we are to even come close, we must understand that real joy comes from obedient service .

This morning the ladies lit the candle of joy for the first time. But before it was lit they relit the candles of hope and peace. Each year I have to look back at the previous year’s bulletins to be reminded of the order of the four candles. Ironically, on this, my last Advent before retirement, I finally realized that there is a progression in the four themes. Now I don’t know if that was by design or not, but to me it became pretty clear this week. As I thought about the meaning of joy and thought back to hope and peace, it seems to me that for us to have real joy, the kind to which we are called by God, we first must have hope and we need to find real peace.

Hope. It is one thing to hope for something. On the first Sunday of Advent the video reflected on hoping that Silent Night would be sung, that better gifts could be purchased, that Gramma wouldn’t be lonely, that there wouldn’t be homework over the holidays. Now there is nothing wrong with hoping for such things. But that is not really the sort of hope we need if we are to be true people of God. What we are called to be about during these days is not simply hoping for something or some things, rather we are called to ***have*** hope. Hope for the future, hope for a broken world, hope for the salvation of the world.

It isn’t easy to have hope these days. Every day we hear of terror, of fear, of war of hatred. And as we try to find hope we are told by many that are of the world that our hope lies in protecting our self-interest and fueling our prejudicial hatred. We are told to hunker down and over react. We are bombarded by ridiculous arguments, half-truths and downright lies, and because of our anxiety some of us come to believe it is all true. And Jesus just shakes his head. Not because there are no dangers, not because we have no need to be concerned, but because we have given in to those who would proclaim hopelessness. We fall for ridiculous arguments because we can’t seem to see an option.

I read an article this week which declared that we are a nation on the verge of a nervous breakdown. In part it said, ***“We live in troubling times. Global order is being tested in new ways nearly every day, as is America's mythical vision of itself as a haven from the tumult and troubles of the outside world. Technology both contributes to the disorder and makes the pandemonium seem worse than it really is by shoving it down our throats all day, every day, while our leaders (and would-be leaders) act in ways that exacerbate our worries. Amidst all of that, a measure of anxiety is understandable. But we desperately need to get a grip — and some philosophical and historical perspective on the nation's problems and the nature of the threats it faces. Achieving a measure of equanimity in a time of trial is always difficult. Attaining it when reason and good sense are continually drowned out by ceaseless electronic chatter is more challenging still. Yet that is precisely what we need. The time has come for an intervention — and we have no choice but to administer it to ourselves.”***

We need to get a grip. It seems to me that Advent is a pretty good time for that self-intervention. It is a time for us to put things in proper perspective. No, we are not to put our heads in the sand, that would be foolish. But neither do we need to waste all our energy being anxious and angry. But things look so hopeless you say. Well, that surely was what many of the people of God said while in captivity in Egypt for 400 years. But fortunately there were some who hung on to hope during all that time, some who kept the faith, trusting in a future yet to come. And in the end the faithful who heeded the message from God were led out.

Then, as they wandered in the wilderness there were again many who lost hope. Remember how the people complained? Having quickly forgotten how absolutely unbearable life in Egypt had been, they lamented the fact that they were not back there, because they didn’t like the food God had provided. But Moses never gave up hope and eventually he led the people to the edge of the Promised Land.

But they didn’t stay in that Promised Land. Once again most of the people found themselves exiled, living under the tyrannical rule of the Babylonia captors. The situation must have seemed hopeless to many of the people. After all, they knew the stories of their ancestors and well might have thought, well, here we go again. But some remained faithful and when Cyrus allowed them to return they were ready to rebuild the temple and to move forward. But the temple would later be destroyed again. And the people would again know the heartache of persecution.

As we think about the first Christmas and consider all that had to come together for it to be fulfilled we remember that there were plenty of reasons for the people to have lost hope. The Roman occupation government had no use for the faith of the Hebrew people and had no real concern for any people for that matter. For them it was all about power. As the Christmas story unfolded there were all sorts of odd messages and strange occurrences, John kept talking about one who was to come and about fire and winnowing forks. A dear women who had long been barren and was now in her golden years, and another who was a virgin, were being told they would have sons. Things might have looked hopeless, but John and Jesus were born and one of those amazing babies, born of what seemed to be a hopeless situation, was to be the hope of the world, he would be the Prince of Peace. There has been turmoil in our world from the very beginning, remember all that took place in Genesis? Disobedience, fratricide, loose living. Yet there has also always been hope and the promise of peace.

There is that second Advent word. I am convinced that we must begin with hope. If we allow ourselves to give in to despair and hopelessness, we will most likely find ourselves mired in the muck of such destructive thinking. We will become bitter, we will stay angry, we will be mean-spirited. But when we cut through all the noise and refuse to be taken in by all the pessimism we can find hope on even the worst of days and in the most difficult of circumstances, for we know that in the end, there will be victory for the one whose birth we honor in these days, and that victory will eventually bring peace to even the most turbulent of times.

Have you ever noticed that hopelessness is generally self-fulfilling? If we convince ourselves that our situation is hopeless we are likely to stop trying. When we think a situation is beyond redemption we give up on it instead of seeking to redeem it. But when we are able to look beyond the crisis, when we calm our spirits and still our minds we can look past even the most disheartening of trials to claim the hope that comes to those whose point of reference lies beyond this earth. And when we do that when we hold fast to our hope in things spiritual we can find peace. As we affirmed last week, God’s peace is not about the absence of conflict or the abolishment of all suffering, rather it is about knowing that God can work good out of even the worst of situations.

So we come to joy. From the very beginning we have been told that the coming of Christ is about joy. It was first proclaimed to the shepherds out in the field. The angel announced good news of great joy, to poor shepherds, those on the lowest rung of the social ladder, some who had little and who would go back to keeping sheep just as before the coming. So what about this joy? Obviously it must not be the kind of fleeting thrill that comes from winning the lottery or getting a big raise unexpectedly. Those things might make you happy for a while but they are not the stuff of true joy. Such happiness is fleeting, like that new car feeling or the momentary thrill of the child who has already, more or less, abandoned the new toy by the end of Christmas day.

We were told in the letter to the Philippians that our calling is to rejoice in the Lord always, not just as we encounter things special and enjoyable. Paul even repeats himself. Again I say rejoice. There is an interesting footnote in the New Revised Standard translation. It says that the word rejoice could also be translated “farewell”. That is an interesting alternative, especially if we think of the more literal meaning of the word. We tend to associate it with some sort of departure. For instance the military “hail and farewell” observances many of you have participated in. But I want us to consider a more literal interpretation. Originally to speak a farewell was to convey a desire that one to whom the salutation was spoken would fare well in life, that they would get on well in life. I think that helps us understand what the concept of joy is really all about for those who seek to be true followers of Christ.

It is important that we remember what was going on with Paul when he wrote the letter to the church at Philippi. Paul wasn’t enjoying the good life from a villa on the Mediterranean. He wasn’t serving a prospering congregation in Jerusalem. He was not enjoying the fruits of his tent making business, Paul was in prison. Still he counsels rejoicing, bids the congregants fare well. I’m not at all sure I could offer such advice were I in prison. But Paul did and he sets an example for us. Paul not only called the people to rejoice, he modeled true joy. His joy was not the product of good fortune or great success. His joy was born of a vital relationship with his creator and with the Son.

Paul reminds the people to who he writes that the Lord is near and then he tackles one of life’s most difficult struggles. Paul takes on anxiety. We are a worried and worrying people. We are an often uptight bunch. But we need to remember that we have hope and we need to return to that peace which comes to the hopeful. And we need to simply place ourselves in the hands of God. Paul puts it this way, ***“Let your gentleness be known to everyone.”*** I like that image. We are to be gentle, seeking by our very demeanor to calm our little corner of the world, to refuse to stoke the anxiety. Paul goes on ***“The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be known to God. “***

Later in his letter he would write, ***“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.”***  Contentment. There is, I think, the key to real joy. Paul was content no matter what. And he affirmed the foundation for that contentment when he wrote. ***“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”*** The most literal translation of the original language is actually ***I can do all things in the one empowering me, Christ.”*** What Paul understood and what he seeks to have us understand is that when we immerse ourselves ***in*** the Spirit of Christ we can know the real joy, the contentment which comes from being the creatures we are meant to be. And when that happens we will be on the way to becoming those new creations Paul wrote about elsewhere. And we will know real joy.

Once we have clung to hope and have, by faith, found a sense of peace even in the midst of turmoil we like Paul can know joy no matter what. Much of it has to do with attitude and outlook. As we said earlier, hopelessness can easily become self-fulfilling. If we convince ourselves that things are hopeless, they probably will be. William Blake wrote, ***“The tree that moves some to tears of joy is in the eyes of others only a green thing that stands in the way”*** I believe that, not always, but most of the time, that which causes our anxiety is the product of perspective. I know I far too often see that which ought to move me to tears as nothing more than an annoyance to be avoided. And when I do, I choke off that joy which is to be mine always, and I revert to being that old creature Paul calls me to put away.

I was challenged by something I read this week by a pastor who had fairly recently graduated from seminary and who is now serving a church in Australia. She speaks of being deeply moved when her 87 year old mother, who was suffering from several significant illnesses, made the journey to witness her ordination. A few weeks later the new pastor was visiting her mother who asked out of the blue if things had changed much for her daughter since graduation. After thinking for a moment the daughter replied that things were not that much different. To which her mother replied, ***“Well that was a waste of time wasn’t it.”***

I fear we sometimes generate similar feelings in those whose lives touch ours. They look at us, see us go off to church or hear us talk about being Christian, but the question they have is ***“Have things changed for you?”*** or perhaps they are asking **“*Where is the joy?”***

So how does this joy look to others if we really have found it? In his own crusty way I think John was telling those he had just called a bunch of snakes how to put aside slithering and how to find joy. He called upon them to bear fruits worthy of the repentance to which they had been called. When the crowd asked what they should do in response Paul said, in so many words, ***“Give to those who are in need, feed those who are hungry, be honest, avoid taking advantage of others.”***  Later the one whose coming John anticipated would say pretty much the same thing but more succinctly. So I close this morning by declaring to you that if you want to know real joy and if you are willing to bring joy to the world you need to have hope. You need to be at peace. And you need to be about doing those two things Jesus affirmed as fundamental, love God and love others. Then rejoice always and give thanks.

For your sake, for the sake of an anxious and sullen world and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who brings real joy, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.