

## Philippians 4:4-7

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

## Rejoice!

### I.

There has been a change. Maybe you have noticed it.

There was the old. I always used to prefer the old. Some would say that's because I myself am getting to be a bit older. Perhaps one could say that the old reflected some of the words of today's Gospel, when John the Baptist said: "You offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Therefore produce fruits in keeping with repentance!" (Luke 3:7-8, EHV).

In this case, the old is the old Advent color of purple. Last year Holy Trinity had purple paraments. The word "paraments," by the way, is just a fancy name for the cloths hanging from the altar and the pulpit and the lectern.

John the Baptist, in the portion of the gospel that is on the screen, talked about repentance. Purple was used in the Advent season to remind us that it is a penitential season. We are, as John invited us, to look inside ourselves and see a deep need for repentance. There is a reason that God needed to send a Savior into the world—our sins have separated us from God.

There is a reason to focus on repentance in Advent. Paul says in the Second Reading that is our sermon text for today: "Do not worry about anything" (Philippians 4:6, EHV).

We spoke about the Philippian congregation last week. It certainly would be understandable if they would be worried. Paul had been thrown in jail when he was in Philippi because he had driven a demon out of a slave girl so that she was no longer able to benefit her employers by telling people about their futures. People remembered what Paul had done, which adversely affected the little group of Christians. That meant that, in addition to all the regular worries of life, the Philippian Christians also faced some very real physical threats.

At this moment in history, American Christians don't face many physical threats because of our faith. Still, just like everyone else, we find much to worry about.

Are you one of those who lives paycheck to paycheck? If so, you find it difficult to follow Paul's instructions. You worry about the pile of unpaid bills. It just seems to grow higher and higher. As soon as you come up with a workable plan to deal with one problem, another crops up to increase the worry.

Christmas is coming. Christmas is supposed to be a joyous time. Is it for you, or do you find things to worry about? There are ongoing health concerns that cause stress, but Christmas always comes with stress for many people. Perhaps it is self-inflicted, but it is there, none-the-less. Parties and family gatherings are planned. There simply *must* be a special meal. Gifts must be selected with care for each individual. Perhaps you are going to see family out of town; maybe they are coming here to see you. There always seems to

be at least one family member who insists on being the nattering nabob of negativity. You just *know* it's coming. What will be the issue that causes this year's big blowup? So you worry.

Perhaps your Christmas will be tinged with sadness. Those who have experienced the loss of a loved one find many holidays to be stressful.

All your worries shine the Christmas light on the need for repentance.

Doesn't all of this reflect the reason for having purple as the color for Advent Paraments? Purple signifies the need for repentance. Repent of your worries. "Do not worry about anything," Paul said.

Did you notice that I put on the old purple stole of the past today?

## II.

The change has been a change to blue. Why blue? Does blue mean that the old attitude of repentance is outmoded for Advent? What does blue signify?

Blue is said to be the color of the pre-dawn sky. At this time of the year we experience the fewest number of daylight hours. Maybe the first cup of coffee hasn't had its effect yet, so you may not take the opportunity to notice. Unlike summertime, you probably back out of the garage to begin your day just as the darkness is starting to fade. If it isn't cloudy—West Michigan seems to give us a lot of cloudy days, so watch for the clear ones—if it isn't cloudy, even before the sun peaks over the horizon, the skies begin to brighten. They take on a beautiful blue hue. Even as the days grow shorter, you know that by Christmas the times will already start to lengthen. Blue inspires expectation.

As the skies turn blue, you know what is soon to come—you know the yellow ball of the sun is about to arrive and make your day cheerier.

John said in today's Gospel: "Someone mightier than I is coming" (Luke 3:16, EHV). Paul said in our sermon text: "Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> ... The Lord is near" (Philippians 4:4-5, EHV). It isn't just dawn that's over the horizon, it's the dawn of Christ. We are waiting in expectation of something fabulous. Blue skies and blue paraments signal a coming change. Your day is cheerier when you look forward in expectation to the coming of Jesus at Christmas.

Blue is quickly growing on me. It's time for a change (change into blue parament). The new paraments, by the way, were a gift from a congregation that has moved into a new building with a new altar and found that these weren't suitable for their new altar furniture. They work beautifully with ours. We are thankful to have them.

The promised light of Christ is about to break over the horizon. Isn't it beautiful? We watch and wait in hope. Unlike Old Testament believers, we already know that God kept his promise to mankind. He sent Jesus. Our hope isn't just anticipatory, it is a sure hope. We are certain. Christ changes our darkness into light; he changes day into night. Our lives are filled with joy. Blue reminds us to celebrate the upcoming birthday of Jesus with excitement.

## III.

No matter what the color of the paraments, we have always used a pink candle in our Advent wreath for this Third Sunday in Advent. Pink expresses that joy.

Paul's joy echoes the joy our First Reading expressed. Zephaniah wrote: "Be glad and rejoice with all your heart... <sup>15</sup> Israel's king, the LORD, is in your midst!... <sup>17</sup>The LORD your God is with you as a hero who will save you" (Zephaniah 3:14-15, 17, EHV). The Lord

means the Savior-God. We will soon be singing hymns about Emmanuel. Emmanuel means “God with us.” Jesus is not just a little baby boy, he is God, who has taken on human flesh to come among us. He is, as Zephaniah said, a king. He is the King of kings. He has come as a hero to fight our battles.

Both purple and blue sometimes get the word “royal” thrown in front of them. We both repent in the purple and look forward with the blue to something that removes all our worry and sadness. “Rejoice! <sup>5</sup>The Lord is near” (Philippians 4:4-5, EHV), said Paul. Our reason for rejoicing is found in the Lord Jesus. Jesus is coming.

Rejoice. Jesus is the mighty hero Zephaniah looked forward to in hope. He is the mighty hero-King who conquered sin and death for us.

Worry threatened to rob us of hope and joy. The real worry wasn’t really to be found in finding just the right Christmas gift or paying the bills or dealing with difficult family members. The real worry is sin—all sin. Sin separates us from God. Even the sins we think are insignificant—not even worth thinking about—are sins that God cannot stand.

We are about to celebrate the birth of our royal King. Jesus, who is God with us, came to be born in that stable in Bethlehem to be our humble King. Though God is not subject to the moral law, Jesus took on human flesh so that he could carry in his own body the sin that separates us from God. From his humble birth in Bethlehem, his whole life was laid out with the purpose of going to the cross to pay for our sins.

The story of Jesus, from birth to death, gives us a new purpose in life. It gives us a reason to rejoice. We know that our Heavenly Father does not see our sins any more because of Jesus. We know that he sees, instead, Jesus’ righteousness as our own righteousness and perfection.

Because we wear Jesus as a garment of salvation, we also know that our Heavenly Father smiles on our service to him. We rejoice because we are constantly reminded “Your sins are forgiven.” That frees us to bring our treasures to the King in everything we do in life.

The Lord is near. “Do not worry about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (Philippians 4:6, EHV). The God of our salvation has sent the Lord Jesus to deal with the greatest problem we had—the problem of sin. That is the God who is near us. If he cares about us in this very great thing, he also cares about all the everyday concerns of our lives. So confident can we be that he cares about these things that even when we bring him our prayers and petitions, we can already bring them with thanksgiving.

#### IV.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7, EHV).

Peace on earth, goodwill toward mankind, we are about to hear the angels announce at Christmas. True peace is the peace we experience with God because Jesus has removed the guilt of our sins. God’s peace goes even further, beyond anything we can comprehend. His peace extends to heaven.

Can you understand the joys of heaven? Neither can I. The Bible speaks about heaven in the most glowing terms to try to put the incomprehensible into human words. Gold is spoken of as being as commonplace as asphalt—the streets of heaven are paved with it. Banquet tables groan with food. Gemstones litter the descriptions of heaven. Choirs of angels sing songs even more beautiful and uplifting than any song we sing

today. Best of all, we believers will be there with Jesus.

The peace that is so illusive in our world today will be the natural order of things. It will be a peace that has no end.

While the peace of heaven is yet to come, even now we experience that peace. No matter what is going on in this life, God brings us the peace that gives us a reason to rejoice. He is there to sustain us and support us. Because of Jesus, he is here to forgive us. We can place all that we are and all that we have into his hands for time and for eternity. Rejoice in his grace and mercy to us. Thanks be to God! We have peace. Because of it, we rejoice. Amen.