

Rejoice in the Lord? Always?

Philippians 4:4-9^[1]

Notes from the pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
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1.

Paul says four things right off the bat: (1) Rejoice. (2) Rejoice in the Lord. (3) Rejoice in the Lord Always. (4) Again I say, rejoice.

This is a word of hope. We rejoice, yes, but we have a reason to rejoice. We rejoice in what? *The Lord*. And we do it always.

Because the Lord reigns, because the Lord wins, because the Lord's love is from everlasting to everlasting, because the Lord heals, and welcomes, and calls, and sustains we can rejoice.

We can rejoice in and out of season, when our team is on the way to the championship and when our team doesn't even make the tournament. We are not rejoicing about our team, or about our professional successes, or about the growth of our family, or about the good weather. *We rejoice because there is something truly reliable to rejoice about*. We rejoice in the Lord. God, in Jesus, is at our right side. The Lord is my shepherd.

Therefore, Paul urges the church to rejoice. He doesn't know the hard times that may befall the church in Philippi. He doesn't know the struggles they may face. He cannot predict how they may or may not be persecuted. But he is certain the church in Philippi should rejoice. *Rejoice in the Lord*, he urges. *Rejoice in the Lord Always*.

2.

But—and this is a serious “but”—How do we rejoice in hard times?

On Monday I watched an Independent Lens documentary called *El Equipo*,^[2] which follows U.S. anthropologist Dr. Clyde Snow as he set out to train a young group of Latin American students in the use of forensic anthropology. Their goal: to investigate disappearances in Argentina during the “dirty war.” Over many years, the group ends up traveling to El Salvador, Bolivia, and Mexico, doggedly working behind the scenes to establish the facts for the families of the victims. Their job is to find buried human remains, count the bullet holes, and, as best they can, to identify the bodies and return them to family.

I knew about these disappearances, but the documentary was a chilling reminder. From, roughly, 1974 to 1983 many who opposed military dictatorships were arrested, killed, or otherwise “disappeared.” In Argentina alone, it is estimate that between 9,000 and 30,000 people were killed. Victims included dissidents and leftists, union and peasant leaders, priests, journalists, artists, monks and nuns, students and teachers, intellectuals, and suspected guerrillas. All were killed in an attempt to silence social and political opposition.

It has happened in countries around the world. The United Nations says widespread or systematic attack directed at any civilian population is called a “forced disappearance” and qualifies as a crime against humanity. Such crimes have been rampant in our not-so-distant history. Consider:

- Algeria beginning in 1992 (6,000 disappeared and presumed dead).
- Mexico from the 1960s to the 1980s. (1,200 estimated murders.)

- Chile. (You may remember, or want to look up, the Jack Lemmon and Sissy Spacek film called *Missing*, a 1982. It is set in Chile and is about the kidnap and murder of a journalist there, and the scores more who had been disappeared.)
- China.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Columbia.
- Egypt.
- El Salvador.
- Northern Ireland.
- Pakistan.

In these places and more, there are documented cases of disappearances, mass kidnap, massacre.

I think I need to watch different documentaries.

This was a heavy, engrossing night of exhausting television. And the question that the Apostle Paul intimates haunted me on Monday and it haunts me now and it bothers me whenever I watch or read the news: How do we rejoice in hard times?

Hard times: The war in Ukraine. The remnants of the civil war in South Sudan (that Bob and Kristi Rice were just here telling us about). And now the war in Israel.

Rabbi Cook at Temple Sinai had been walking around in a fog after Hamas kidnapped 150 civilians. On October 7th, *more Jews died in a single day since the holocaust*. (I'll let that sink in...) Rabbi Cook's letter to the religious community can be found in my Friday emailer.

Also in my Friday emailer, you'll find Paul's words to us: Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS.

Paul wasn't tone deaf. He knew, as we know, the world is filled with beauty and awe and wonder, but the world is also filled with suffering. Paul knew about suffering. He wrote this encouraging letter while in prison. He wrote the words "rejoice" when he was in jail.

Just remember what Paul suggests we rejoice about. *Rejoice in the Lord*. In the Lord. In the Lord. In the Lord.

And when we rejoice in the Lord, trust in the Lord, call upon the Lord, rely on the Lord, seek guidance from the Lord, and follow the Lord's example, we can engage in this world of suffering with the deep, deep joy that comes with serving and following the one who says, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavily burdened."

Our rejoicing doesn't set us apart from the world's suffering, our rejoicing in God positions us better to enter into the world's suffering with healing in our hands. To be centered in God orients us always, but especially during the hard times, to engaging with neighbor. Paul is NOT suggesting we put on rosey glasses or look the other way. To rejoice in the Lord positions us to bring grace, healing, joy, and love even to the deepest part of the valley of the shadow of death. We can't go it alone. We go with Jesus, who lead us. *And we go rejoicing*.

3.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I say, rejoice.

Do it now.

This is Paul's last instruction to the church at Philippi. Don't wait to begin this rejoicing. Do it now. Do you hear the urgency? Rejoice in the Lord always AGAIN I SAY, rejoice. And these words: ⁸*Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* ⁹*Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.*

Rejoice in the Lord right now—and let that praise lead us right now into tangible, hands-on service. Write a letter. Call a friend. Share a cup of coffee. Say a prayer. Hold somebody's hand.

Rabbi Alan Cook urges us to reach out to our Jewish friends with a word of connection, of support, of love. Let's reach out, also, to our Palestinian friends, our Jewish friends, our Muslim friends, our Christian friends, our Middle Eastern friends. Don't wait. Why wait? *Don't be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good* (Romans 12). Reach out and out and out.

And . . .

Rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord.

Rejoice in the Lord always.

Rejoice in the Lord now.

God only knows where this kind of rejoicing will lead us. And, thanks be to God, that God goes with us. AMEN

Philippians 4:4-9

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

⁸Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

[1] On Monday, March 16th, 2020, the Monday after our first covid-cancelled Sunday service of worship, I sent our congregation the first of many hundreds of emails. This very first communication was intended—as all of them were—to encourage our flock during an uncertain time. The format back then consisted of a daily scripture passage. This passage from Philippians 4 seemed to say something essential about living the Christian life, and it seemed an essential word in a time of nearly unparalleled uncertainty. *Who knew then we'd be closed for almost a year?*

[2] Independent Lens: El Equip/ Legendary U.S. anthropologist Dr. Clyde Snow sets out to train a new group of Latin American students in the use of forensic anthropology. Their goal: to investigate disappearances in Argentina during the "dirty war." The group expands its horizons, traveling to El Salvador, Bolivia, and Mexico, doggedly working behind the scenes to establish the facts for the families of the victims.

<https://nhpbs.org/schedule/summary.aspx?progId=IndependentLens2502>