

Rejoice in the Lord Always

Scriptures: Psalm 106: 1-5, 47-48
Philippians 4: 4-9

What more glorious a time of year than mid October to rejoice in God's good Creation! It's easy to "*rejoice in the Lord*" for those of us who love nature and who live in the temperate climate of North America in the autumn. In my book there's no place more gorgeous than being out on a country road here in New England, traversing woods and fields at the height of fall. It's like God took paintbrushes and splashed color everywhere. The scents of the falling leaves, the warm Indian summer breeze, the fullness of the harvest... all speak of a God who blesses us so richly with all her bounty.

Friday a week ago I got into my car, it being the beginning of the holiday weekend, and headed up to Vermont. I had made an AirBnB reservation at a country inn near Glover for that night, and had a set of directions and suggestions of what to see written for me by a friend who lives up there in the summers. The "Northeast Kingdom," as that corner of Vermont is called, is like something straight out of an old Currier & Ives lithograph, and you should experience it if you haven't done so already, or if it's been a number of autumns since last you were up there. It's well worth the trip!

On Saturday morning I hiked down the gravel road from the farmhouse inn where I spent the night. The road curved around to the left through a "sugar bush" stand of golden maples. In the field just past them I saw the red tractor of my farmer host, Jim, and I chatted with him for a couple of minutes as he hoisted maple logs from a recently chopped woodpile into the trailer hooked behind his tractor. He told me his family had owned this land for several generations, that he'd been working it for forty years, and that one of his sons, whom he hoped would carry on the farm work when he was gone, lived just down the road, around the bend in the woods.

As I walked on further down the road, I prayed a prayer of thanksgiving for this beautiful corner of God's realm, and for the peace of God that it exemplifies. Later, as I wandered more of the country roads of the Northeast Kingdom in my car, I found myself reciting the words of Psalm 106: "*O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. God's steadfast love endures forever.*"

So here it is, 2017, and fall has come once again, just like always, a little late this year, possibly due to global warming, but as lovely as ever. No matter what the news may be, no matter how desperate the world situation, no matter what may be going on in our personal lives, God delivers this natural miracle of the changing seasons year in and year out.

Those of us who are blessed to live in this peaceful environment of New England develop our appreciation of God's steadfastness by this annual cycle of the seasons. Whether aware of it or not, there's not one of us sitting in this room today who's not experienced the wonder of this natural pattern each and every year we've lived

here. Even in times of strife and chaos, like the one we're living through now, God's natural patterns remain steadfast and reliable: birth and growth, blossom and fullness, decline and decay, death and then rebirth once again... the cycle repeats itself throughout all our years: spring, summer, fall, winter, then spring again.

Yes, it's easy and it comes naturally for us to rejoice when surrounded by the beauty and bounty of life. No one has much of a problem with this. But is it as easy for us to do what the Apostle Paul counsels the Philippian Christians to do: to "*rejoice in the Lord always*"? Spring is easy. Summer's a snap. October, with its autumnal glory, comes easy enough for us. But what about for people living in Puerto Rico this October, or in the Florida Keys, or in Texas? What about all our brothers and sisters who face insurmountable problems in just making it through another day? How are they supposed to rejoice and to give thanks? Paul's counsel to do so in all circumstances must come as a real challenge to them this fall. We need to keep them in our prayers as we go about enjoying the blessings we so often take for granted living in Massachusetts during autumn.

Or what about what follows October for us here, for November, and the winter months following December and the highs of the Christmas season... January, February and so forth? Winter does present its challenges to our ability for rejoicing. Or what about old age, and the approaching reality of death? It's this last part of the natural cycle that presents more of a challenge for all of us. How do we rejoice about the parts of life we'd rather not have to go through? How do we give thanks even in the face of death?

I should ask some of you elders for your answers to this question. Probably you'd have your own insights and particular ways of finding things in which to rejoice in later life. Some of them might be simple and obvious, if pointed out. Others might be things that astound us. Probably all of us know people who somehow have been able to find blessings in the midst of what appears to be a depressing scene to the rest of the people around them. Sometimes the person who finds a silver lining in every dark and cloudy circumstance is someone we'd call a "Pollyanna," someone the rest of us would say was out of touch with reality, only seeing the good and ignoring the bad. But this isn't the kind of rejoicing to which Paul calls us as Christians.

Actually Paul was in prison himself when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. He was incarcerated in Rome, awaiting word of his execution date, facing certain death. There was no going back for him, no way out. Death was looming on his horizon line. Yet there he was, writing to this congregation of early Christians who'd supported him over most of the years of his ministry, encouraging them to rejoice always, in all circumstances, whatever they faced.

Paul was speaking from a deep source of joy he'd found, a well of spiritual depth that transcends the life we know and the death that each of us must face, just as surely as October turns into November, with winter following not far behind. His was a joy that comes from God, and which knows no bounds in this world of ours.

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say rejoice... For the Lord is near.” These are Paul’s last words, his testament, to the people of faith he loved most dearly. He believed absolutely, he knew it in his bones, he sensed through every pore, that his time to be with the Lord was drawing near. But for him, rather than being something to *fear* it was something to *celebrate*. Rather than being something to *avoid*, it was a goal to *achieve*, a *fulfillment*, a *completion of the race*. For in his dying with Christ, Paul was certain of his resurrection with Christ.

We Presbyterians aren’t particularly adept at rejoicing. We’re typical of many Protestant denominations, like our friends the Methodists and Lutherans, in being more naturally inclined towards the expression of serious thoughts and sober feelings. Prior to coming to Massachusetts I lived in Minnesota for 20 years, surrounded by Lutherans, some of whom were of the “Dark Lutheran” variety, as Garrison Keillor has aptly labeled them in his “Prairie Home Companion” stories, good and sober church-going people who rarely smile or see the glass as being anything other than half empty. If I didn’t suffer from Seasonal Affective Disorder, or SAD, when I moved to Minnesota in 1994, I surely was inclined to show the symptoms of it by the time I left in 2014. Besides the long, dark winters, it must have been all those Lutherans up there who just took the sparkle right out of me!

But Minnesota isn’t the only region with more than its share of gloomy Gusses... New England historically has been a veritable garden of gloom! Charles Cousar, in his commentary on the Philippians passage puts it this way:

“Like the proverbial New Englander who fears that ‘someone, somewhere might be having a good time,’ some people associate the faith itself with a sobriety that suspects joy of being trivial or of lacking in dignity.” In contrast to this, the faith we hold in the power of resurrection at work in our world and in our lives should bring us not despair, but joy. Cousar writes: *“Joy comes as an entirely appropriate response to the good news of God’s action in and through Jesus Christ. Joy, then, is a by-product of the gospel”*¹, and is the perfect antidote to our worries and our gloom.

The news Paul was most in touch with was very *good* news. It was not the news of his impending execution, but rather of the promised resurrection to new life beyond it. It was for him news that set everything else in perspective, even the most fearful, hurtful, destructive experiences life could bring. They were simply recast for him, as part of the larger picture of God’s promise of resurrection to eternal life.

“Don’t worry about anything,” Paul wrote. *“But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”* Ours is a God who listens, who cares for us, who knows us better than we do ourselves, and who through it all will never leave us to the power of death. God is with us through everything, even death, bringing us into a new and emerging world, much like how springtime emerges from winter, a world we can’t yet fully grasp or fully comprehend. Yet it is promised to us by our steadfast God, and God’s promise is sure.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your minds in Christ Jesus” he writes. What wonderful words of Paul’s, perhaps the greatest, in all of his epistles! *“The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding...”* How could we say it any better, 2,000 years later? That’s what I was so thankful for being put in touch with through my interaction with nature as I wandered through the autumn landscape of the Northeast Kingdom last weekend.

God’s peace does indeed go beyond anything we could describe, understand or conceptualize. We’re just a part of this much bigger, greater, infinite Creation. And for our finite minds to try to grasp the infinite is to be asked to stand in awe of the mystery and majesty of God, lying at the base of all life.

Albert Einstein has been named the most outstanding scientist and thinker of the 20th Century. Not initially a man of faith, the further Einstein studied mass and matter and the cosmic forces at play in the universe, the more certain he became of the presence of an organizing, energizing and sustaining *“source of all being.”* For him, God’s handiwork was clearly displayed in the firmament, each and every day. As he approached the end of his career and the end of his life, he acknowledged repeatedly the role he’d found God to be playing behind the scientific forces he’d merely identified with equations and concepts comprehensible to human beings.

Yes, this is a marvelous universe in which we live. We only see a few layers of reality, a small corner of our universe. It’s full scale and majesty surpasses our ability to discern or comprehend. Yet what we *can* see we can give *thanks* for. What we can *know* gives us the clues to the presence of God’s steadfast, enduring love all around us. So we can join together this morning in praising the Lord who gives us life and this world in which to live it. We can rejoice always, for the Lord is near.

“And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep us in Christ Jesus,” today and always. Yes, thanks be to God. Amen.

1. Charles Cousar, in Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year A; Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, c. 1995, p. 522