**The 4:4 Response to Life**

**Context**

We return to Paul’s letter to the church in Philippi for some wonderful words of instruction in the faith. And as we are in the Thanksgiving weekend this is really fitting for us today.

Our focus for the morning is Philippians 4:4: Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

Let’s call it The 4:4 Response to Life. (btw… “rejoice” is also how you can say hello. I rejoice to see you. Or “joy to you.”

But what does this really mean, to rejoice in the Lord always? And, especially, what does it mean here in the Year of our Angst?

A Pollyanna is someone who is ‘excessively cheerful or optimistic,’ maybe not just pretending, but actually believing everything is good when it isn’t. That isn’t only really, really annoying, is actually unhelpful, it’s is often just plain wrong.

Is the 4:4 life just a form of being a Pollyanna - pretending everything is good all the time?

Everything isn’t good! A million people are dead from a pandemic. Yes, we have done well here in Canada, and on the Island especially, but we ought not become complacent; a second wave seems to be building even in Canada and it would be foolhardy to think it won’t touch us too.

As we look deeper into Paul’s thought world what we will find is that ‘Rejoice in the Lord always’ is not a way to sidestep our troubles, a way to ignore reality, but a way to look at our reality that is based on deep underlying truth.

As Thomas Friedman said this week that we need more than ever are “Leaders who can put more truth into the world than they muddy and put more trust into the world than they erode matter” – (NYT, Oct 6, 2020).

We want to be that kind of a leader in our community and in our city. So where is the truth in this remarkable exhortation?

In Paul’s thought world, and I base these observations on our context in Philippians 3, those verses just preceding 4:4 as well as 1 Corinthians 15.

We can rejoice always in the Lord because

* are the hope of the resurrection,
* our response to God,
* …and his response to us.

First, the reason we can rejoice is because of the great hope that we hold.

We know that Paul bases his entire theology on the resurrection of Jesus.

Specifically,he bases his claim to being an apostle on the “appearance” of the risen Lord to him on the road to Damascus in, it was actually a *bat kol* (Acts 9:1-9). ***Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me***(1 Cor 15:8).

***For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures…*** (1 Cor 15:3ff)

When Paul says Rejoice! he is speaking about the joy of resurrection. The hope of the life to come. Had we, as Christians, no other help in life, no guiding presence, no shepherding of the Holy Spirit, we would have the hope of the resurrection. Paul said it plainly himself…and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins… (1 Cor 15:17).

We have ***all*** these things! With good reason Paul exhorts us to ***Rejoice in the Lord always***.

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:10)

Why do we rejoice? Because the resurrection of Christ is in our hearts. And how can sharing in his sufferings be a good thing? Because of the hope of resurrection.

This brings us to our second point on why the 4:4 response to life is possible. That is, our response to God. To rejoice in all things is really – a response to God and his grace in our life.

Do you remember that two weeks ago we were in Philippian 2 and there we found Paul encouraging us to “work out our salvation?” We talked about the responsibility to do that but also the immense gift we have of each on being able to craft a life of faith unique to our own talents and gifts. And we talked about the importance of owning that creative process by attending to the means of grace in our lives. That is, by eschewing the Do-Nothingness that can sometimes halt our progress in the faith, and embracing Do-Somethingness that Paul implies when he says ‘…work it out.’

This is the key to our rejoicing. …if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Phil 3:10)

Paul is remarkably humble about his place in Christ, not assuming he has arrived. We never arrive…. We never get to say, ‘well, here we are. Let us Do-Nothingness.’

Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own... (Phil 3:12)

If you wish to rejoice in the Lord, you have to approach that phrase with all the proactivity your faith can bring.

So let’s take some of the phrases from Philippians 3, the thought world that we are exploring, to heart together her for a moment:

I press on to make [my union with Christ and his resurrection] my own (3:12)

…forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead (3:13)

I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. (3:14)

And so… we can Rejoice in the Lord!

There is something about our pressing on, our forgetting what lies behind, our straining forward to what lies ahead which makes our rejoicing real.

The 4:4 response to life is based on our acceptance of our responsibility to forget the past and move on to a more positive future, no matter what our challenges are. That is, in its very essence, the meaning of hope!

What does ‘pressing on’ mean for you?

One of the most precipitous moments in our life came just after we had moved to England to do the PhD at the University of Sheffield. We had planned thoroughly, I had changed jobs and moved to make enough money to complete the education, then…we had moved to Pasadena and done the masters degree in two years.

And then we moved to England to complete a PhD, hopefully in three years. Bought a house. But it was essential to the plan that the partner of a post-grad student from abroad could work in England. After four months (we moved in July) we couldn’t find employment for Christine. She did temp work, which was truly awful but not employment could be found.

I was actually at the point of accepting that we would have to pack up and abandon the very thing in life that I felt was my dream. We pressed on and on, there was little food in the house, and we just couldn’t sustain it. But do you know, at the last critical moment Chrissy got a job, we found a lodger and we were through.

The really discouraging thing for everyone, family and lodger, was that I had to do the cooking for those three years. What is wrong with a baked potato with pork and beans on top? Oh but didn’t we have fun too!

The third, and most important of the reasons why the 4:4 life is possible, is also the most mysterious and yet amazing aspect of this.

It is found in a small phrase you hardly notice in 3:12: but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own

Or, put another way, I press on to lay hold of the prize because I have been laid hold of by Jesus Christ

***But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me.*** (Message)

And there is the grace.… he lays hold of us.

Rejoice in the Lord always!

That is the grace of God. So we use the language of relationship with God because there is a synergy wherein God meets our efforts with his enabling Spirit and together we move toward his good pleasure.

From the Text

Well this beast of a year, this 2020. Perhaps it may sound particularly hollow to cry out Rejoice in the Lord. But when we move down to the foundations of that declaration, we find there the source of hope that can make such a seemingly incongruent thing possible. Rejoicing in the midst of Covid, as season of suffering and death for many? Rejoicing in the various culture wars that are undermining our sense of security and the basis of social cohesion?

We are not being asked to find good in everything that happens. The phrase is not ‘rejoice in everything that happens.’ We don’t have to do contortions to always find a silver lining in events or circumstances that don’t always have them. This is not an exhortation to try to figure out what there is about something that has happened that is for the good.

No, the phrase is Rejoice in the Lord always, which we understand to mean 1) a celebration of the hope of the resurrection, 2) our efforts to make it real in our lives and 3) the grace of God that lays hold on us in that relationship with the divine. As Paul says in 3:1: Rejoice in the Lord! For me to write the same things to you is not troublesome to me, for you it is a safeguard!

Again, I will say rejoice!

Benediction:

Finally, beloved,[[e](https://classic.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+4&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-29434e)] 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[[f](https://classic.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Philippians+4&version=NRSV#fen-NRSV-29434f)] these things.