

Devotions – March 22-28, 2020

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Sunday, March 22, 2020

Text: Philippians 4:4-9

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

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. 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.

For the next week of devotionals, we will take the topic of living with peace and joy in light of these Philippians verses. As Christians we hope to have some measure of peace and joy in our lives and be able to display this to the world. After all, if not us, then who? We have the promise in scripture of **peace** that surpasses human understanding. In John 15, Jesus said he has spoken to us so that his **joy** would be in us and that our joy would be complete. How can we claim these fruits of the Spirit in our fast-paced world filled with a barrage of stressful news, overwhelming concerns, and constant distractions? Even though we have the possibility of peace and joy, it probably won't come floating down to us on angel wings. They are gifts, but at times we also have to apply ourselves to receive them. Maybe peace and joy are disciplines, at least in part, habits that we develop and exercise. And Lent could be a good season to cultivate these practices to draw on during times when fear and anxiety might come more naturally than peace and joy. Throughout the week return to the verses above to allow Paul's powerful words to become a part of you.

Let us Pray: *Lord, guard our hearts that we may carry peace and joy within us and be your instruments of peace and joy in the world. Amen.*



Monday, March 23, 2020

Text: John 14:27

“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.”

A word about this peace which surpasses human understanding. The first clue is that Paul is writing the Philippians verses from prison! Our usual picture of peace is a pastoral scene with green hills, sheep grazing and a stream gently flowing by. The peace of God is more like peace in the midst of life's circumstances, not a deliverance from them. A deep, abiding tranquility within. And the picture for that would be of a bird singing on the tip of a branch that hangs out over a waterfall that crashes into a deep gorge.

Is it heartening, or does it take away our excuse, to realize that our peace and joy isn't related to all the factors of our life situation? In fact, studies show that only about 10% of our life's happiness is related to external factors such as income, health, family, etc. The peace that surpasses human understanding doesn't fluctuate with the wind of our life's storms or the temperature of our emotions. It is grounded in our relationship with God.

“Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious and it does not cease to bear fruit” (Jeremiah 17:7-8).

Let us pray: *Gracious God, help us to trust in you for all we need in this world and to let your peace rule in our hearts. Amen.*



Tuesday, March 24, 2020

Text: Psalm 16:17

“In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

That beautiful word “rejoicing” - along with joy - is used by Paul over a dozen times in Philippians. Both times it is used in Philippians 4 it is referred to as “rejoicing in the Lord.” This again speaks not to the circumstances of our lives, such as “rejoice in the cancer diagnosis” or “the threat of debt” but in the fact that the Lord is near, that God is with you in the circumstances. I have heard the word “RE-joyce” comes from “return to joy.” I can't verify what language that translation comes from, but I can verify it in my experience and I think it fits. We don't always feel the joy, but we can return to it. And that gives us hope.

Realize that this same Paul who tells us to **rejoice always**, also wrote of having “great sorrow and unceasing anguish” and later speaking of the hardships he endured ended with, “And besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches.” During Holy Week we will reflect on Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Matthew says he was agitated and Luke writes that He prayed with such anguish that “his sweat became like great drops of blood.” Even our greatest examples of a Godly life, in their humanity, struggled with the same emotions we are prone to. But those emotions didn't rule the day or prevent them from living out God's

will and “returning to joy.” I’ve come to see that peace, joy, anxiety and the like aren’t either/or deals, but both/and. Our hearts and minds often hold both, such as grief when someone you love dies; and at the same time relief that their suffering has ended, and joy for their new life in heaven.

And what do we consider to be “**JOY**” anyway? Is it winning the lottery? Absence of problems? One of the best definitions I’ve heard for joy is from Evelyn Underhill: “Unearthly delight in God’s action and the privilege of being caught up into God’s action whatever the cost may be ... real joy is all about God and real peace is all about God.” Father Gion, the pastor of Indian mission churches in North Dakota, points out that “Joy is in no way a disassociation from the pain of life, but a profound faith in and appreciation for the goodness of life even as all hell is breaking loose.”

“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God” (Psalm 42:11).

Let us Pray: God of all hope, keep me mindful even in difficult circumstances that you are with me, and I will return to joy in due time. Amen.



Wednesday, March 25, 2020

Text: 1 Peter 5:7

“Cast all your anxiety on him, for he cares about you.”

How do we get to the peace and joy promised? An important step along the way is to deal with the anxiety which robs us of the peace and joy the Lord wants for us. We often speak of giving things up for Lent, such as gossip, social media, or heaven forbid – chocolate! Have you ever considered giving up anxiety??? What’s that you say? Ya, give up anxiety for Lent. George MacDonald, in “Your Life in Christ,” speaks of denying self (as in take up your cross) and I often repeat these words to myself when I need some healthy self-talk: “So must we deny all anxieties and fears. We must not mind anything. We have to do with God who can, not with ourselves where we cannot. **Our care is to will his will.** His care is to give us all things. This is to deny ourselves. ‘Self, I do not have to consult you, but him whose idea is the soul of you ... I have to do, not with you, but with the source of you.’” It’s still Lent. Try it now to give yourself an Easter gift of new life.

Our focus scripture in Philippians gives us a very practical tip: Pray about everything, give all your concerns to God and then thank him in advance. God cares about each and every detail of our lives and the more we speak to him about those things the better friends we become. They say praying without leaving our concerns with God - and giving thanks - is like going to the bank for money but not cashing the check. Let your prayer life mature beyond asking for help from

God to LISTENING for God. **“Morning by morning he wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught”** (Isaiah 50:4).

Elsewhere Paul urges us to “Give thanks in all circumstances.” Paying attention to all that God is doing in your life leads to gratitude, one of the best antidotes to anxiety and on the path to peace. Keeping a gratitude journal could be an excellent Lenten practice. Doing so has changed many lives, bringing peace and joy.

Let us Pray: *God of steadfast love, grant us the wisdom of surrendering all our concerns to you and leaving them with you, while giving thanks for how you will work in everything for good. Amen.*



Thursday, March 26, 2020

Text: Philippians 4:5

“Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

Our focus scripture in Philippians advises us to “think on these things” listing: whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. Our good mind is a gift but like the gift of a beautiful singing voice or athleticism, it requires training and discipline to reach its potential. Reigning in our thoughts is definitely a discipline that takes effort but can change our habit of focusing on the negative. Seeing the dark side of things seems to be a default for our brains so we are aware of risks and danger. It was probably a survival thing, but neuro research shows that kind of thinking literally changes our brain chemistry and structure. It seems our great physician had a degree in psychiatry when he prescribed “thinking on these things” which also changes our physiology for the better. By applying tools God has given us we can lessen our tendency toward anxiety and change our outlook. Or do you want your monkey mind to be the boss of you??

Starting the day with God’s word and surrounding the day with scripture is a great way to think on the good things and let God’s word get a leg up on the negative flow of daydreams and runaway self-talk. Take a verse from the week’s lectionary that speaks to you, memorize it, post it on sticky notes or whatever it takes to keep it in front of you for the week. Or do this with any verse God has impressed on your heart, such as: “This I know, God is for me;” “I know the plans I have for you, plans for good and not for evil.” Hear Jesus saying, “Lo, I am with you always.”

Let us Pray: *Gracious God, thank you for your wise and comforting words. Help me to find you near me now. Amen.*



Friday, March 27, 2020

Text: Psalm 77:11

“I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; I will remember your wonders of old.”

When you are facing a trial or something that threatens to steal your peace and joy, remember your history with God. One day when I was part of a Bible study called “The Mighty Acts of God,” I was stopped at a draw bridge waiting for a boat way upstream, so I was impatient, but heard a strange lonely voice singing all on its own on the radio – “God’s love has never failed me, yet.” Gradually the voice was joined by a violin. Then the voice got stronger and was joined by another, and another, and then more instruments until it became a whole orchestra and swelling choir **repeating the same one line**. And it went on forever as I was stuck waiting on the bridge. I actually thought it was a broken record on the radio station, until it finally soaked into my spirit. “God’s love has never failed me, yet.” It has become a line I sing to myself whenever I need a reminder of God’s deeds in my past and I realize the same God is with me to help now. Develop catch phrases such as that you can call on whenever needed. Imagine Paul at this point in his ministry and all the hardships he can recount that God has brought him through. By the time he tells us to rejoice always, he has quite a history with God. And you do, too. Stop and take inventory. **“I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go”** (Joshua 1:9).

Let us Pray: *Delivering God, thank you for all the ways you have helped me in the past. Let your promise and our history together give me courage for this moment. Amen.*



Saturday, March 28, 2020

Text: Psalm 24:1-2

***“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it;
For he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers.”***

The good Lord has blessed us with so many resources including music, meditation, fellowship and more for grabbing hold of peace and joy while living in this fallen world. But I want to mention one we may overlook: the natural beauty that surrounds us. The beauty of nature is God’s gift to us. We here in God’s country are blessed by our access to fresh air, wildlife,

natural wonders. A time in nature can be one of the most restorative fixes for our souls. Studies have shown that patients who have a view of green space heal faster than those without the view.

Martin Luther has said, “God writes the gospel not in the Bible alone but also on trees, and in the flowers and clouds and stars.” Pause often during the day to breathe deeply, look up and around to drink in the beauty. Feel the majesty. Allow wonder. There is actually a practice now called “Forest bathing!” Some of us here in the North Woods call it hunting or fishing, but you get the idea.

John Eldredge has written a book titled, “Get Your Life Back: Everyday Practices for a World Gone Mad.” He tells of early days as a therapist when he was unable to come up with a way to help a woman with horrific life circumstances. He felt a nudge to ask her about the flowers embroidered on her shirt and when he did her countenance changed as she said, “Only beauty helps.” Ahhh.

These are some thoughts and practices for our peace and joy. But it’s not about striving or perfection. We won’t achieve total “peacedom” on this side of life. It’s about growth in the direction of these gifts. Through our abiding in Christ we bear fruit in our lives and for the world.

“So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time if we do not give up” (Galatians 6:8).

Let us Pray: *Bless the Lord, oh my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name!*

