

**Sermon preached
by Doug King
December 14, 2003
Advent III
Philippians 4:4-7**

"Rejoice in the Lord always." This is perhaps the single most annoying line of scripture in the entire Bible, when it is taken out of context. If Paul had written this line to the Philippians while he was sitting on a park bench somewhere enjoying the sunshine, I would feel a deep need to personally smack him. I have an aversion to folks who believe that the demonstration of faithfulness is an eternally chipper attitude about life. But Paul was not on a park bench when he wrote these words, he was sitting in a prison cell and that makes all the difference in the world. Only a person who is in a place of suffering can dare to utter such words as "Rejoice in the Lord always" without them being merely superficial clap trap.

This text is not about optimism or walking on the sunny side of the street, or denying the painful realities of this world. None of those things have any deep connection to faithfulness. Barbara Gerlach writes, "I have little patience for the blind joy of those who fail to see the sufferings of the world. I am skeptical of those whose joy seems forced, happy no matter what befalls them. But there is another joy—deeper than the good and bad times life metes out, stronger than our best attempts and sorest failings—a joy that lifts us when we cannot lift ourselves, a peace that grasps us and returns us renewed. This is the joy Paul proclaims as he writes to the Philippians from prison. Rejoice in the Lord, for our deepest joy lies not in our circumstances, but in God."

I deeply want to join Paul on this journey, on this road that brings a joy beyond the circumstances of life. But I find myself always believing that perhaps tomorrow will be the day I get there. Just let me get through this current patch of difficulty and then I will be prepared to embrace this deep rejoicing. And every day brings a new petty annoyance or crisis into my life that puts the time to rejoice in God on hold. So I keep waiting for when the time will be right to live a life characterized by rejoicing.

And in this advent season, that may not seem all too inappropriate. After all, we call this a season of waiting. Perhaps if we continue to wait God will come along and fix everything and we can get down to this rejoicing business in earnest. Let's just hope that God is not waiting on us the way that we are waiting on God.

Thankfully we know that that is not the case. God has never waited upon us to act before bringing love to us, or even before sending the very Son of God into our midst.

Madeleine L'engle wrote this poem entitled, "First Coming."

"God did not wait till the world was ready,
Till...nations were at peace.
God came when the Heavens were unsteady,
And prisoners cried for release.
God did not wait for the perfect time.
God came when the need was deep and great.
God dined with sinners in all their grime,
Turned water into wine. God did not wait
Till hearts were pure. In joy God came
To a tarnished world of sin and doubt.
To a world like ours, of anguished shame
God came, and God's light would not go out.
God came to a world which did not mesh,
To heal its tangles, shield its scorn.
In the mystery of the Word made flesh
The Maker of the stars was born.
We cannot wait till the world is sane
To raise our songs with joyful voice,
For to share our grief, to touch our pain,
God came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!"

You see, God did not wait for any sign of perfection or even any sign that we were remotely ready, before sending the Son of God into our midst. God does not wait upon us to demonstrate our love for the divine before God responds in love toward us. Every day God rejoices in us and showers us with love. Even as we are mired in our imperfections, trapped in all that makes us less than faithful, God celebrates us with love.

And yet for most of us, or perhaps at least for me, it is so hard for us to celebrate God, so difficult for us to rejoice in the Lord in those times in our lives when we seek the intervention of God and it appears lacking. The reality is that God rejoices in us regardless of how we are acting at the moment and yet we find it terribly difficult to rejoice in God when God does not meet our expectations.

On this day when we re-enact the birth of a child, a child of God, the child of God, with barnyard paper masks and silver star balloons, let us recapture a taste of the child-like wonder of expectation. Let us reach back for the innocence of the belief in a wide open realm of wonderful possibilities on the way in this universe of our loving God. We do not seek to take this journey as an escape from whatever is broken in our lives. We carry the broken-ness with us as we reach out to grasp the promises of a God who loves us regardless of where we stand in this life. We reach out to a God who joyfully sings out our names, each and every one, on each new day. We reach out to a God who is exuberant and anxious in devotion to us.

Frankly, I do not quite get it, how this God of ours keeps coming at us with love when many of us do our best to keep God at arm's length much of the time. I suppose that is the thing, when we reach out to God and do not get what we want our will often gets broken and we turn away from God. But no matter how many times we fail to meet God's expectations, God continues to reach out in love to us, rejoicing in our very existence. God's will is never broken. God's commitment to us never wavers. God's love for us will not be curbed, or corralled or controlled, it just keeps coming forward to meet us wherever we are. Let us "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say rejoice." Amen.