

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It seems appropriate this Thanksgiving to consider St. Paul's exhortation to rejoice. That exhortation happens throughout his letter to the Philippians, but especially right before our second reading. "*Rejoice in the Lord always,*" Paul says; "*again I will say, rejoice*" (Phil 4:4).

Surely rejoicing may seem a bit harder to do this year as we're in the midst of a pandemic, with traditional Thanksgiving Day festivities being discouraged, with calls not to travel but to stay hunkered down in your own family "bubble" for a little while still to try to get the community spread of this virus tamped down and under control.

Certainly this year has been a trying one, and COVID-19 has been the reason for much of our distress. Like St. Paul, writing this letter from his house confinement in Rome, we have been brought low. We have been confined at times due to our governor's orders. We have confined ourselves at other times because of our fears of this virus.

In our context, therefore, we may think that St. Paul's call to rejoice is ill timed. We surely can't rejoice now. But that is not so, for Paul's timing is "*always.*" "*Rejoice ... always.*" When you "*abound,*" rejoice! When you are "*brought low,*" rejoice! In times of "*plenty and hunger, abundance and need,*" rejoice.

In the Old Testament, the Preacher tells us there is "*a time for every matter under heaven,*" and St. Paul says the time for rejoicing is always. In fact, the Preacher contrasts some of these matters: there is "*a time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted,*" and so forth (Eccl. 3:1-2), but he never contrasts anything with rejoicing. The closest he comes is to contrast weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing (Eccl. 3:4).

There has been plenty of opportunity this year for mourning and weeping: loved ones getting sick and some dying; millions of our fellow citizens getting sick with the pestilent virus and thousands of them dying. People losing jobs; businesses closing down; people "coping" with drugs or violence, and so forth. And yet, in the midst of all this, we Christians rejoice, for we rejoice always.

We don't rejoice abstractly, mind you, but our rejoicing is in the Lord, turning to Him in the midst of all these troubles, for we Christians are not called to carry all of our burdens ourselves, but heavy-laden with life's troubles, we are called to turn to the Lord. Paul says, "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.*" We turn to the Lord because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7); we come to the Lord because He gives us

rest (Matt. 11:28); we ask of the Lord because He gives us the “*peace ... that passes all understanding.*”

We rejoice in the Lord and turn to Him in prayer and supplication. After all, if we are rejoicing always, doesn't that suggest that we should be praying without ceasing, giving thanks in all circumstances (1 Thess. 5:16-18). Indeed. And we pray thus with confidence because we, like St. Paul, know that “*the Lord is at hand*”; or as I would have translated it: He is near, after all, Jesus said “*behold, I am with you always*” (Matt. 28:20); and in the Old Testament the Lord said, “*Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you*” (Joshua 1:5). The writer to the Hebrews echoes that promise. We say with confidence, “*The Lord is my helper*” (Heb. 13:6), even as with the Psalmist we repeat in the Divine Service liturgy: “*Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth*” (Ps. 124:8).

More than that, we can rejoice for we know that our travails are temporary. We know with Paul that “*the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us*” (Rom. 8:18). As we heard last Sunday, our hope is not “*in this life only*” (1 Cor. 15:19), but in the resurrection to eternal life, for God loves us; He is for us; He has given to us His only begotten Son, not sparing Him, but delivering Him up for us all, for our trespasses, and raising Him up for our justification (John 3:16; Rom. 8:31; Rom. 4:25).

That's why St. Paul could even say that “*we rejoice in our sufferings*” (Rom. 5:3), because of God's great gift in Christ Jesus, for, on the one hand, His suffering was so much more than any suffering we may endure, and, on the other hand, we know suffering builds us up in endurance and character and hope.

We rejoice in the Lord and give thanks to God the Father because of this great gift. Of course, James reminds us that “*every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights*” (James 1:17), but this one is the best. We rejoice and thank you, Father, for loving us and sending us Your Son. We give thanks to the Son, Jesus, for giving up His life unto death for our salvation and rising again to life; and for sending from the Father the Spirit. We rejoice and thank you, Jesus, for this grace. We give thanks to the Spirit for coming upon us in Holy Baptism, for working faith in us through this water and the word of the Gospel. We rejoice and thank you, Spirit, for giving us life through faith. We give thanks to the Lord for this faith in which we stand, which moves us both to love and do good to others and to open our mouths to sing His praises and tell of all His wondrous deeds. We rejoice and thank you, Lord, for making us Your children and giving us this privilege to show the world Your love.

And this finally is why we rejoice in the Lord always—because our rejoicing is not dependent on the situation we find ourselves in, abounding or brought low; but our rejoicing flows from our faith, given and sustained by God Himself. *“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* In this faith, we know that *“God will supply every need of [ours] according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.”*

*“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”*

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.