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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
11/23/2016, Thanksgiving Eve
Philippians 4:4-9

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

In this evening's Epistle Lesson, Saint Paul urges us to be a thankful people: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." He is not content to say it one time only, but doubles up: "Rejoice... Rejoice."

One of the comments I sometimes hear at my Pastor's Booth on the Tuesday morning sidewalk is the confident claim, "Things are pretty good for me nowadays. I do not need the church." Well, I am glad when things are pretty good for people nowadays. But I cannot help but think to myself, "Yes, but what about God? Maybe your Maker would be glad for your company in church!"

Now, I am not quite saying that *we* might not need God, but *he* needs us. After all, we know from the Bible that God is rich in himself and requires nothing from us. The Psalms express this point in a splendid way. The LORD says this:

¹⁰For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills.

¹¹I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine.

¹²If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. (Psalm 50:10-12, KJV)

So, the Lord does not *need* us. On the other hand, the Bible does contain many exhortations to praise the Lord and to remember his benefits to us, as if this matters to God! A recent Psalm in my morning devotions made this point:

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits:

³Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases;

⁴Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; (Psalm 103, KJV)

So, the Bible thinks that is reasonable for us to think of God and to give thanks for his tender mercies.

Also, we can think of our Lord's lament over Jerusalem. The fact that Jesus is going to die in that city is a terrible thing and reason enough for Jesus to brood over that town. But in his lament, Jesus seems not to be regretting his own suffering and death there, but simply the fact that he loved the city and wishes that the city had loved him too:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not! (Luke 13:34, RSV)

It is not so much his own suffering that Jesus laments. It is more along the lines that he would have been glad for the company of Jerusalem. He would be glad for the company of each of us along the sidewalks of life. He would gather us together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.

And then there is the recent Gospel story of Jesus healing the ten lepers. One of them comes back, falls on his feet, giving thanks to Jesus (Luke 17:16). Jesus is grateful for that one fellow, but wonders about the other nine:

Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine?
(Luke 17:17, KJV)

Jesus does not curse the nine. He does not take back his healing of the nine. But he does seem to miss the nine. He regrets that they did not return and give thanks for their blessings. It seems like such a human thing, this business of Jesus missing the other nine. Glad to say, he is not missing you all, for here you are in church, on Thanksgiving Eve.

Let me return to St. Paul's call to rejoice in the Lord:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.
(Philippians 4:4, RSV)

I think it is important for us to remember that our brother Paul is not a naive man. The apostle who urges Christians to rejoice is someone who is well acquainted with life's sorrows and disappointments. Past, present, and future all contain blows for St. Paul. He has known flogging and shipwreck. He has been in peril on land and on water:

on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; (2 Corinthians 11:26, NRSV)

He has known rejection, contempt, and earnest attempts to overturn his preaching of the Gospel – the message most dear to him, the center of his apostolic work.

He is not naive, I say. All of these troubles lie in his past and could well haunt his nightmares. His present circumstances likewise are tough. He is writing to the Philippians from prison, and that is not an easy way of life. And his future too is grim. In another of his letters, St. Paul sounds as if he knows that his time on earth is running out:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: (2 Timothy 4:7, KJV)

By tradition, Paul died the death of a martyr. Legends say that he was beheaded.¹

So, in listening to St. Paul, we are not dealing with a starry-eyed dreamer who knows little of life and its heartaches. He has known his full share of such heartaches. Yet he redoubles his call to rejoice:

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. (Philippians 4:4, RSV)

What is going on here? How can the apostle be so cheerful? How can he speak so readily of rejoicing?

To try to answer this, let me speak of my mother's favorite Bible verse: Romans 8:28. The verse starts off this way:

We know that *in everything* God works for good with those who love him... (Romans 8:28, RSV)

I know this was my mother's favorite verse because she said so in church. In my childhood church, the preacher would sometimes call upon people in the congregation to stand up and give a testimony. Once, he called upon people to stand up and tell us their favorite verse. "Sister Rachel, tell us yours." And she

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_the_Apostle#Death

answered, “Romans 8:28: “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God...”

Looking back, I bet it was with my mother as it is with many Christians who love this particular verse: It is a verse that comforts them in face of life’s perplexities, mysteries, and sorrows. They look beyond what they can see, and they trust that God will sort things out in the end. So, they confidently entrust the things of life to God. They believe that in the end, nothing is out of control!

So it was with St. Paul in his letter to the Philippians – the letter that contains his exhortation to rejoice always in the Lord. As I said, Paul was in prison as he wrote this letter. But he believes that though he is in prison, things are not out of control. He can even perceive the Lord at work, bringing good from his imprisonment. And so at the start of his letter, we read Paul’s testimony:

¹²I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, ¹³so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ;
(Philippians 1:12-13, NRSV)

How are you going to defeat such a guy? You put him in prison, he converts the guards! He does not give up, does not become weary, does not become discouraged, but simply believes that our Maker will bring good from out of all this chaos.

Let us believe this too. If this past election, for example, or private sorrows and disappointments in your life are weighing you down, do not throw in the towel. Do not stop saying,

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: (Psalm 103:1-2, KJV)

Even more, when you reckon with the easily-seen good things in your life, do not throw in the towel. Do not fail to give thanks to God for all his benefits. For Carol and me, our breakfast prayer often goes something like this:

Thank you, heavenly Father, for seeing us through the night, giving us this food and shelter, and for the day that stretches ahead of us. Let it be a good day for your church and for our family, in Jesus’s name, Amen.

Likewise, for any of us, we can give thanks to God for having made it through the night – indeed for having made it *thus far* in life. Think of all you have been through, and yet here you stand, safe and sound in church. That is worth being grateful for. And you have the day and evening before you. By God's grace you will have many days and evening's before you. They will bring their full measures of joy and setbacks, but never will they be out of control, for "all things work together for good to them that love God..."

This is an endless reason for giving thanks to our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.