

*“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.”*

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Expectation and anxiety. Those two words seem to sum up so well the many emotions that flood through people at this time of year. We see expectation in the children who wait so impatiently for the joy of Christmas morning, with its presents and treats. There is the expectation that comes as we wait for distant family and friends to ‘come home’ for Christmas to share with us the joy of the season. There is the expectation that comes in wanting to see the look on our loved one’s faces as they open up that gift that we know is just perfect for them. There is the simple expectation of having a holiday—a change in the routine; a break from work and school; a chance to spend time with the people we love. We are also on the brink of another new year, and with it the sense of a new beginning and a fresh start. For us, as the people of God, there is also the expectation that comes as we wait and watch for the Lord who is coming again to bring us to the ultimate Christmas celebration, when we truly are at home forevermore.

‘Tis the season of expectation, but with expectation also comes a great deal of anxiety. The very busyness of the season is often stressful and draining. The coming of Christmas can emphasize some of the problems that we are facing: perhaps we are out of work, and that has an impact on our Christmas. It may be that this is the first Christmas we will celebrate apart from someone we love, either because they have died, or because they have moved far away, and cannot come home this year—and we worry about how we are going to deal with these changes. Sadly, the very things that make Christmas such a joyful time can become a source of grief and anxiety for those who do not have wonderful, warm “Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street” kinds of remembrances about this time of year.

We often feel caught up in a tug-of-war between expectation and anxiety. We may approach each new day with a sense of expectation—but expectation gives way to anxiety and uncertainty, as the reality of life shatters our expectations. Joyful hope is so often replaced by troubled moments. We want to look forward to each day with joy, but we are anxious, because we don’t want to get our hopes up, just to have them dashed to pieces again.

Our text today has some wonderful encouragement for people living betwixt and between the tensions of expectation and anxiety. Paul tells us how to make the most of these days. More than that, he reminds us that each and every day, our faithful God is with us, working to lead us to the salvation He has won for us in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Paul’s advice for living in these days starts with a simple encouragement: *Rejoice always*. That is the theme of this 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent. Joy was something near and dear to Paul’s heart. He told the Philippians: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”* (Philippians 4:4, ESV) He calls us to rejoice, even in our suffering. When Paul talks like this, it makes us wonder if he was some sort of demented masochist. Doesn’t Paul understand the sort of things we have to deal with in our lives? Doesn’t he realize how much of a struggle life can be? We just can’t always be joyful.

Paul wasn’t out of touch with reality. Paul had more than his share of suffering and disappointment during his life, a life cut short when he was martyred for his faith. But Paul knew that it wasn’t the circumstances of life that brought joy. His joy was in Jesus Christ. Think of the number of Advent and Christmas hymns and carols that speak of joy—the joy that is ours because God has come to us as the babe of Bethlehem. We have joy, because we have a Saviour who has—and who does—deal with the very thing that causes all the unhappy circumstances of our lives. We have a Saviour,

who came to set right what sin had destroyed, by giving Himself in our place on the cross. We have joy in the Lord of life who is greater than our difficulties. We have joy in a living, risen Saviour, for now, in Him, we look beyond the unhappiness and uncertainty of this life to the perfect bliss and peace that awaits us in heaven. We have joy, for while we may not know how the days are going to unfold before us, our God does know—and He has promised to work all things for our good.

We can have joy in the midst of our difficult moments, because God has given us the blessed privilege of going to Him in prayer, something else Paul says is necessary if we want to make the most of these days. ***Pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*** We always think it is impossible to always be praying, but we can be in a spirit of prayer, knowing how we need God and depend on Him for everything we are and have. If you have a potted plant in a corner somewhere, you probably have to turn it on a regular basis, for it continually leans as it seeks the sunlight. In the same way, a believer's heart always turns to God, for we know our life comes from Him. Think of how our anxiety would melt away if we would face the days with a prayer on our lips, asking God to bless us. Think of the peace that would fill us if we did take it to the Lord in prayer!

Paul also tells us that if we want to make the most of these days, we need a spirit of thanksgiving. This might seem like something so obvious, but it is also something we often forget. How often do we grumble and complain against God because He hasn't done the things we wanted or expected of Him? Yet do we remember to thank Him when He has been our help and stay in our anxious moments? We often base our thanks on the "if only's" of life. If only God would get me a better job, I would be happy and grateful. If only God would help me pass that English test, I would be grateful. If only God would solve all my problems and take away all the pains, the nuisances and the inconveniences of my life, then I would have reason to thank Him. Let us not lose sight of the fact that God's ways are higher than ours. The things we see as problems and inconveniences may be God's way of working greater things for us than we can even begin to imagine. What was it that the psalmist said? ***"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever."*** (Psalm 23:6, ESV) As we remember that wonderful truth, we give thanks to God in Christ Jesus, whatever the circumstances of our lives, knowing that He has given us every reason for thanksgiving in the salvation He has accomplished for us.

If you really want to take on the day and overcome the anxiety that we so often feel, approach each day with the joy that comes from knowing God's love for you, and that His power is at work for your good. Go into that day with prayer in your heart, and tell Him what He already knows—tell Him the things that worry or frighten you. Seek His grace. And thank Him. Thank Him that you were able to get out of bed to face another day. Thank Him that He has a purpose for your life, and that He will bring it to completion in His time and according to His gracious plan. Thank Him that you are His child through your Baptism, and that you—a poor, miserable sinner, are forgiven for the sake of His Son, who died and rose for you.

It all sounds so easy, doesn't it? Actually, it is easy. The secret to making the most of these days is no great secret. All it takes is faith—faith in a great and wonderful God, who was, who is, and who always will be at work in our moments of joyous expectation, and in our moments of high anxiety. Paul even has some encouragement for keeping that faith strong and growing. He tells us: ***Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.*** All these things speak of our worship and spiritual growth. We quench the Spirit's fire in us when our worship and study of God's word is empty or indifferent. There are times when we do treat the prophecies of God's truth with contempt, as we turn away from His word to live on our own terms. We blindly accept the wisdom of the world, or the temptations it offers, without testing things against the standard of God's truth and holiness. There was an orange juice commercial which said that a day without orange juice is like a day without sunshine. The truth is that the one thing we need for each day, to fill us with joy in believing and to help us in the darker moments is the very presence of God with us. We need Him and His truth. We need Him and His power. We need Him; so why do we so easily move away from Him? Why do we let all the things of the world become more important to us, and then wonder why we feel that we are struggling so much with life? We need to hold on to the good—and only God is good. Only God can truly satisfy the desire of our hearts. Only God can take away the anxieties of life. Only God can give us hope that makes life worth living.

Thankfully, our God has done what needed to be done. He came to our rescue in that manger, so long ago. He took all our cares into Himself, and paid the price of our sin and disobedience on the cross. He lives to silence all our fears, and to take away our anxiety and fear and doubt, giving us the hope all that is to come. We, who struggle between expectation and anxiety approach each day with prayer, with the confidence that comes from faith in the Saviour who came, who comes, and who is coming again. How blessed we are to know that ***He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it.*** In Him, we make the most of these days and all our days! Amen.