

## Christmas Eve Service at 7:00 pm

### Dec. 11 - Advent III - Rejoice and Give Thanks - *Always*

In the first lesson, Isaiah writes: *I will greatly rejoice in the LORD.*

And today's psalm testifies: *The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad indeed.*

Then in the second lesson, Paul writes: **Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.**

Did you notice a theme running through these readings?

Rejoice, be glad, give thanks.

Paul says that it is possible in all things to give thanks and praise to God. *In all circumstances?* This world, as it is, is an often sad and tragic place. Not all the times of our lives are good times. *And what then?* Paul claims that, with our eyes upon God's promises, it is possible, even in the most difficult times, to give thanks. It is the ultimate act of *faith* -- "*faith*" being another word for the very deepest "*trust*." To be able to be grateful to God even when things are not going our way is an expression of faith in God.  
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When I was a kid, my mother told me, "*Say thank you to the nice lady for the cookie.*" One of the important tasks of parents is to teach their children the ethics of gratitude. "*It doesn't cost you a thing to say 'thank you,'*" they told me.

But that's not exactly true. While a child must be taught to say "thank you" for good things like cookies, it is quite a challenge to say thanks "in all circumstances," even for not-so-good things.

It's one thing to live in God's grace when everything's going well, but it's quite another to experience the reality of that same grace after a period when we ourselves have been lost, searching or distant from God.  
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How is that possible?

When her beloved husband died in his mid-50s, Jean thought her life was over. In fact, the day that her husband died, that is exactly what she said, "Now that Tom has left me, I really don't have a reason to go on. For nearly 30 years I was so dependent on Tom for everything that's important. I feel like Tom has died and I have died."

Less than a year later, Jean had changed. "You know, Tom's death was the worst thing that happened to me. But in a strange way something good came from it.

"I've always thought of myself as a weak person. I have always been cursed with a strong sense of my many inadequacies. And yet, when Tom died, I was really pushed to the wall. I had to reach down deep and to my surprise, I find that after all I am a very strong person! I have talent that I had previously never discovered. The worst thing that happened to me is turning out to have some good for my life."

Jean says that this is an odd situation – she thought her life was ending, but a new one was beginning. The worst thing that happened to her turned out, in a weird way, for good.

*And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will... Romans 8:28, 27*

I wonder if Paul might say to Jean that what happened in her life was not so weird. Things like this happen when we have faith that God continues to work in our lives for good, taking the bad things in our lives and somehow transforming them. And as we realize that transformation, we are able to give thanks to God in all circumstances.

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The last chapters of the Book of Genesis tell the story of Joseph and his brothers. You may remember Joseph's brothers treat him horribly, finally selling him as a slave to a caravan going to Egypt.

They got rid of him. But God did not abandon young Joseph. After many adventures he ends up as high level government official in Egypt. And during a time of famine, his brothers come to Egypt for food – and meet Joseph. Will he seek justice or revenge? But finally he tells them:

*As far as I am concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil – you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good. Genesis 50:20*

Even in the midst of bad times, God is still works in our lives for good. Thus Paul's claim "Rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances." Gratitude in all situations is possible because we know that God's Spirit continues to work in our lives.

But sometimes, as in Joseph's story, thanksgiving occurs in the backward glance. That is, looking back on a bad situation through the eyes of faith, we find that situation has been transformed and we are able to give thanks -- not necessarily thanks in the middle of a bad circumstance, but thanks looking back on a bad circumstance. Looking back, we see how God has woven even that bad situation into God's loving purposes. So Paul says, "*Rejoice always. Give thanks in all circumstances*".

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Charles Dickens begins his *Tale of Two Cities* with the famous statement, "It was the best of times and it was the worst of times." Dickens is pointing to the ambiguity of time. Times come at us mixed with good and bad.

The Advent message: God in Christ has entered our time and is transforming everything. This is not saying that everything turns out just great, or all of our times are times of joy. No, what Paul is saying that it is possible even in bad times to be grateful to God, because Christians have been let in on a secret: In the end, Christ wins. God eventually gets His way with the world. Maybe not tomorrow, maybe not the day after tomorrow, but before it all ends, God will get what God wants.

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She had a miserable time the second semester of her Sophomore year. She had unwisely signed up for a couple of killer courses. She was flunking both of them, in way over her head. Then, to top it all off, her boyfriend of three years unceremoniously dumped her.

"How on earth do you keep going?"

"I think of May 14, 2013," she responded.

"May 14, 2013? What's that?"

“It’s the day of my graduation. Sometimes I picture myself in my cap and gown. I can hear the music and in my mind’s eye I can see myself processing down that long row of graduates, receiving my diploma. That dream, that vision of the future, keeps me going.”

I think that something much like that is at work behind Paul’s exhortation to us, “*Rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances.*”

That vision of God’s future implies that, even in painful and difficult times in of our lives, God is working behind the scenes, busily redeeming our sins and failures, moving a groaning creation toward redemptive release and triumph. Knowing the promised future redeems even the most difficult present.

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I was watching one of those “*Crime Scene Investigation*” shows.

The detectives gather the evidence – after analysis they identify a possible suspect – who is arrested.. The case has been solved. But then I realized it was only the first 40 minutes of a 60 minute program! I knew that somehow, someway the story would go on. What apparently seemed the conclusion could not be the conclusion. The story would continue.

Paul says that what some us perceive as the conclusion of our story with God is still only part of the beginning.

It’s not over. God is not done with you yet. His Spirit is active in the world – and in you. And knowing that truth enables us to rejoice and give thanks in all circumstances.

I’m not saying that it is always possible to have a positive attitude toward life - to believe that no matter how tough times are, that everything works out for the best. No! Rather, I’m saying that we live in the faith that the future belongs to God -- *your actions are not the only actions that are occurring*. In the present moment, there is a story working itself out beyond the present. Your circumstances, as bleak as they may be at the moment, *are not the only circumstance. It is not all left up to us.*

***We don’t have to cope with life on our own.*** The Lord will be at our side – there for us, as he has been in the past.

God has heard our requests in the past - and has blessed us in many ways. ***Won’t he continue to care for us and provide for us?***

The Advent message: God in Christ has entered our time and is transforming everything.  
He is Emmanuel - God with us.

So ***rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.***

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