

"Rejoice, always"
by Rev. Frances Savill
2nd Sunday of Advent
December 10, 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (1 Thess 5:16-18)

The gentiles that Paul was writing these words to were people who lived in a wealthy, sinful city. They felt great social pressures and were sometimes persecuted because of their beliefs. Their neighbors and even family members encouraged them to abandon their uniqueness and return to the life they lived before Christianity.

Paul writes that in all of this rejoice!

In the midst of the pressure, the persecutions, their separateness from friends, or family, and neighbours, rejoice!

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

These are not easy words. I cannot give thanks *for* every circumstance, but I am learning to give thanks *in* all circumstances, for as long as God is present then we have something to be thankful for.

As long as God is on His throne, we know that ultimately all things will be okay. All things may not be okay right now, but we know whose we are, and we know that God is in control, and that eternity is safe in God's merciful keeping.

God is good... all the time!
All the time... God is good!

The same Apostle Paul who wrote the letters to the Thessalonians also wrote: *What can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?* And after a long list of problems, perils, persecutions, things above and things below, comes the final statement - ***nothing can separate us from the love of God, in Christ Jesus our Lord, in all these things we are more than conquerors.***

Through the prophet Isaiah, God spoke comfort and hope; to a people in exile, to Israel still captive in Babylon, to a people in darkness, Isaiah spoke God's promises:

"The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God
to comfort all who mourn;
to give them a garland (*of flowers*) instead of (*sackcloth and*) ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display His glory.

To a people trodden underfoot by their enemies, powerless, and weak, a bruised reed, the promise is that they will be oaks of righteousness. Consider an oak tree – strong, mighty, towering.

And when they are no longer downtrodden and weak, they will act to rebuild God's Temple, and God's City. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastation's; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

Before anything had happened, while the people were still captives, while darkness still covered their lives, before anything had changed the prophet says;

*"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden cause what is sown in it to spring up,
So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all
the nations.*

As surely as spring will bring new life, new plants, new colour, new growth, and the earth will be changed, so the prophet can see the new life God is bringing and already exults in what God is doing, as a gardener might rejoice in seeds germinating beneath the soil. The new life is not seen, but it is known because God's word has proclaimed it.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."

Can you rejoice today, in the spring that is coming?

Eugene Peterson writes: "***All suffering, all pain, all emptiness, all disappointment is seed: sow it in God and he will, finally bring a crop of joy from it.***"

"If we think of the hardships of this life as seeds, we have at least three options for what we do with them:

We can refuse to plant. We can cling to our hardship and to our lives as they are. **We can plant in something other than God.**

WE can choose shallow soil of distractions or self-defeating behaviours in hopes they will produce a crop of quick relief. *We can shop till we drop, drink till we can't think, or work till we can't stop.*

Or we can **plant our hardships in God**. We can surrender our hardships and our lives in faith, trusting that God can and will produce crops of joy and new life." (Max Lucado)

Can you entrust your pains and cares and frustrations, giving them all to God, and trust that God will bring new life, new hope, and some day even good from them?

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

Trust in God's promises and God's faithfulness, for the one who promises is faithful. Our joy, our hope rests in the faithfulness of God. Trusting in God's faithfulness we learn to rejoice.

God is good... all the time.
All the time... God is good.

Thanks be to God.

Prayer:

Lord, we place our trust in you.

In times of gladness, we lift up our praises to you,

In times of frustration and sadness we sow our cares in the soil of your love, trusting in your faithfulness.

Teach us to rejoice always, pray without ceasing, giving thanks to you in all circumstances, for this is your will for us, and how new life comes to us through Jesus our Lord. Amen.