

## Philippians 4:4-7

Advent 3; December 12 & 13, 2021

In 2005, the National Science Foundation came out with an article on researching human thinking. In that research they said that the average person has about 12,000 to 60,000 thoughts per day. If you took those 12,000 – 60,000 thoughts per day and you classified them as either positive or negative, they found that about 80% were negative and 20% were positive. They also saw that about 95% of those thoughts were repetitive. In other words, those negative thoughts that you had yesterday, the thoughts that you have today and the ones that you are going to have tomorrow are going to repeat themselves. That's kind of depressing, isn't it?

Then Paul comes along this morning and says: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** If you look at these words, is the word that seems rather foolish? **“Always.”** We would all say that there are many times in this life that we have every reason to rejoice. That day when the girl you've been dating says “yes;” the birth of your first child; receiving a gesture from your employer that lets you know that your hard work has been noticed and appreciated; when you stand on the beach and watch the golden sun go down on the horizon.

What happens when that special someone says: “no?” What happens when you come home from work and you just learned that you lost your job? What happens when the doctor appointment didn't go the way we would like it to go? What happens when we face just awful things in life? Don't you love it that when you are stressed out about something, and someone comes up to you and says, *“Don't worry?”* Do you feel like saying, *“Gee, thanks! I feel so much better now?”* Sometimes, we wish that Paul had been more realistic when he said: **“Always.”** We think to ourselves: *“I usually rejoice.”* There are days that we just like to grumble and complain when things don't go our way. There are days that we just don't trust God like we should. We look at these words of Paul, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice,”** and think: *“That's easy for you to say, Paul. You aren't walking in my shoes right now.”*

Sometimes, being content is a lot harder than what Paul makes it feel like. Paul takes it one step further and says: **“Do not be anxious about anything.”** Really. How am I supposed to do that? Is Paul one of those people that you meet that is always upbeat? You know the person – nothing ever seems to go wrong in their life. You think to yourself and wish you could say to them: *“You wouldn't have that big grin on your face if you went through what I just went through.”* How can Paul say this? **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”**

Then we need to remember from where Paul is saying these words. He's sitting in a jail cell. It wasn't that he hadn't been in jail before. But this time seems to be different. He doesn't know if he will get out. He doesn't know if he will be executed or not for preaching about Jesus. In the first chapter of this same letter Paul says: **“to live is Christ and to die is gain.”** How can he be content? A few verses after our text Paul writes: **“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.”** Contentment is something that is learned. Contentment is kind of like those flowers that you plant around your house. You don't just plant it, but you must dig around it to keep the soil moist. You must water and fertilize it. It takes some work to keep them alive and keep the weeds from overtaking them. This isn't always easy.

It isn't always easy to be content. Sometimes we think that we would be content if only I had \_\_\_\_\_. (You can fill in your blank.) If being content and then rejoicing is only going to come from having more, then we won't ever be content. If being joyful is tied to the circumstances in our life, then we are not going to be joyful always because our circumstances are always changing. Being content and joyful does not come from what we need. It comes from what we have. We need someone to fix the problem of sin in our lives. We need someone who will take away this guilt that eats us up inside. We need someone who can wipe our slate clean again. We need to learn what we have.

We have a Savior who tells us to dump all our guilt on him. We have a Savior who faced the full wrath of his Father and survived it. We have a Savior who has forgiven all our sins. We have a Savior who wants us to have peace and joy always in our lives. Does that mean that we will always be happy and not be sad? No. God has made us emotional people. Yet, if we only rejoice when the good things are going on in our lives, we are going to miss the blessings that he might be giving us in the bad times. You see, God has promised us that he will find a way to bless us even when we experience the challenges in life.

Why can we trust God in this? Paul tells us: **“The Lord is near.”** He is near to us every single day of our lives. He knows what is going on in each of us. He knows our ups and our downs. He promises us that he is near. As we experience the busyness of this Christmas season, he wants us to pause and remember that he is near. All the stuff that goes on in our homes are good stuff. It is okay to enjoy all that stuff and our families. But he also wants us to know that all those gifts that God gives us would have no meaning if God hadn't given His Son as a gift to this world. Because he is near, he will always be nearby. When he comes again, he will take us to be near Him for eternity.

And then Paul says that the peace that he brings is like nothing else. **“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** Words that sound familiar to us. What Jesus gives us is more than anything in this world. You know what the danger is in all this? Satan wants to take it away from us. He wants us to think that we are alone in this world. He wants us to keep thinking that repeatedly. But God has surrounded us with his love. Nothing can take that away from us.

In these short verses, Paul vividly paints the picture of a community of believers surrounded by the presence and provision of God, grounded in joy and trust, and guarded by peace. What a beautiful way to imagine the Christian Church and our life together as those who belong to the Jesus who is both near to us and coming soon! That is why we can say again and again: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** God grant it. Amen.