

St. John's Lutheran Church  
October 12, 2008

"Let Us Rejoice!"  
Philippians 4:1-9

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

One of the mornings this past week Debbie tossed me the sports section of the morning paper. "I think the sports section is the only section you are going to want to read this morning before you go to work," she said. Of course, the rest of the paper seemed full of stories that all related to our uncertain economic times. It seems that our economy and the economy of the world is so uncertain that we can't even be confident of what the current day will bring let alone looking farther into the future.

So as I sat in the middle of this past week and thought about preaching on this Sunday I wondered what the news would be by Sunday morning. In addition, of course, I have been wondering where we are headed as a nation economically and even where the world is headed economically. I have also had opportunity to listen and talk with countless people over the last couple of weeks. And thoughts on these economic times are as varied as the number of people with whom I have had conversations. Some people are thinking very personally about where we might be headed. Others are thinking more nationally and globally and even thinking about what kind of world we might be bequeathing to our children and grandchildren. At the very least it is profoundly true that we are living in uncertain times.

The Bible text I was working with over these last days was today's second reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians, the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter. And my focus has been verses four through seven where Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." And, of course, the thought that was in my mind was how the suggestion that we should rejoice was going to fall on the ears and hearts of people who find themselves anxious about an uncertain economic future.

But I stayed with the text. And I tried to hear the text given the context of this past week. And what jumped out at me in the text is that Paul is not suggesting that we rejoice in the circumstances of our lives. Of course there are circumstances that arise in our lives that are cause for rejoicing. Babies are born and there is cause for rejoicing. Marriages are celebrated and there is cause for rejoicing. Victories are won, both large and small, in a wide variety of contexts, and there is cause for rejoicing. Many if not most of us have regular cause for rejoicing in the circumstances of our lives.

But this is not the kind of rejoicing that Paul is calling for in this reading this morning. Paul is not calling for rejoicing that is dependent upon the circumstances of our lives. Rather, Paul is calling for rejoicing that transcends the circumstances of our lives. Paul is calling for rejoicing that is rooted in an awareness of and knowledge of the presence of the Lord in our lives.

The three little words, "in the Lord" in the middle of the fourth verse are critically important to an understanding of the verse. "Rejoice "in the Lord" always; again I will say, Rejoice." The point here is that the presence of the Lord with us is independent of the nature of the circumstances of our lives day by day. The Lord is present with us in the midst of difficult circumstances, perhaps sometimes even more powerfully than he is present with us in the midst of the joyous times of our lives. And it is in the confidence of this presence of the Lord that Paul calls upon us to rejoice. "The Lord," declares Paul "is near."

And then Paul goes on to offer a little strategy whereby we might be able to accomplish that which he calls upon us to do. "Do not worry about anything," says Paul, "but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." These last few days, those simple words of Paul come across as a tall order. "Do not worry about anything."

But the suggestion he makes is both wise and wonderful. "In everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." There is a popular slogan that goes, "Let go and let God." It is much easier to say than to do, but it is what Paul is suggesting in this verse. The "letting go" has to do with the acceptance that there are none among of us who are in total control of the structure of our future lives on this earth. And the "letting God" has to do with coming to God in prayer and in thanksgiving for his listening presence, making our concerns and worries and anxieties known to him and then leaving them there at the foot of his throne of mercy. And carrying on with our lives as best as we are able given the challenges of the circumstances of our lives. Rejoicing in the knowledge that our lives are ultimately in his care and in his hands.

And there is this promise that attends the call to prayer. "The peace of God which surpasses all

understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Note that the promise is not that the difficult circumstances of our lives will be taken away. Believers in Christ have lived through all kinds of difficult circumstances in this earthly life, circumstances that are sometimes personally difficult and sometimes on more of a community, nation, or world-wide scale. The difficult circumstances have often persisted. But the promise is a promise of peace in the midst of difficult circumstances, secure in the knowledge that, come what may, our lives are in the hands of the Lord. And even if the future of our lives is not what we planned it to be, we are confident that the Lord will meet us in that future to care for us there even as he cares for us now in the present time. Amen.