

# Sermon Text for April 11, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## ***Zephaniah 3:14-17, Philippians 4:4-7*** ***“Rejoice in the Lord always”***

Happy Easter! We are still in Easter and we are still rejoicing just as Zephaniah the prophets says that we would. The resurrection has taken place and new life has given us new meaning. This week after Easter I changed the words on the sign to read exactly what it read over two years ago, simply Sunday worship, Traditional 8:30 and Contemporary 11:00. It felt normal. Bit by bit, step by step we will be getting back to what we are used to. We are looking forward to easing some restrictions that could impact and make our worship easier and more what we are used to, but it will take a few more weeks and maybe even just a few more months.

As I mentioned last week we find ourselves in what has been called an ice age event which isn't just a single event that has a limited impact but rather it is one that will affect organizations and churches for years. For me, I feel a little like I did when I got here 10 years ago. It sure felt like we were starting over then. Since then we have been able to take on 121 new members. We had an average attendance then of about 160 and when the pandemic hit we were up to 221 as an average. Our programs have proliferated in number and our impact on the community while not easily measured, I think we could say has been more expansive and more in line with the Matthew 25 community that we have aimed to be. So we did well when we started over then, and I am convinced that we will do well as we start over again now.

But even as we start over we find ourselves in the midst of a trial, in the midst of difficulty. Things are normal no matter how badly we want them to be, we can't make them get back to normal just because we want them to be normal, but we are definitely making our way in that direction. Paul found himself also in the midst of difficulty. As he is writing to the church in Philippi he is under circumstances of severe apostolic suffering, and yet somehow he is able to write the most joyous of all of his letters. We found ourselves once again today surprised by joy. The surprise may come because we may not be feeling particularly joyous today, but whatever we are going through Paul is able to match it and yet he tells us to rejoice in the Lord always, again, I say rejoice.

He gives us in our reading in Philippians a five step approach to face life, to face difficulty, to face the closing days of the pandemic as a believer in Jesus Christ. It is a message that we all need to hear so that we do not focus on the wrong thing, so that we stay focused on the promise that Jesus gives to us today for tomorrow and the days to come. Five points? How

long is this sermon going to be. They'll be five quick points, I promise. Let's read our Philippians Scriptures.

## **READ**

What we are going to be looking at today is how does Paul approach apostolic suffering. So I am making a bit of an assumption. I am assuming that each one of us has found in this time over this past year hardships that we either never expected, certainly did not want, and now we find ourselves still somewhat struggling in trying to figure out how do I move forward from here. I am just going to simply follow the order that Paul gives us of how he advises the community, the church in Philippi on how they ought to, taking their example from him, approach their lives as they found themselves in the midst of suffering under a brutal Roman Empire.

Paul begins in vs.4 by commanding the people of his church, and so this is a commandment for us as well, to rejoice in the Lord always, again, he says rejoice. This should come as a bit of a surprise because the reality in which they found themselves did not easily lend itself to a posture of rejoicing. Our first reading we find the prophet Zephaniah also telling the people of Israel who were slaves and were daily experiencing the beatings, the persecutions, the killings which take place on a daily basis when you are an enslaved people, and in the midst of that experience Zephaniah tells the people "Rejoice and exult with all your heart" And he continues in vs.15 and says The king of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall fear disaster no more." This was a promise for the future because their current state was incredibly dire.

Paul's urging to rejoice in the midst of suffering is not new to him. In Colossians 1:24 he says: "I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake". In I Corinthians 6:10 he states that while he is living his life he is experiencing sorrow, he still approaches it with rejoicing. This combination of a reality that is not one that would normally elicit rejoicing and the command to rejoice, to face life with the attitude of joy, is seen even at the resurrection. In Matthew 28:8 when the women leave the tomb they leave with fear and with great joy. You can be experiencing one while also holding steadfastly onto the other. You can be experiencing a reality that is extremely difficult while also living with a joy that cannot be taken from you.

That is Paul's first step in living your life. Rejoice in the Lord always. His second recommendation comes from vs. 5 where he tells us to be gentle. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. A clear characteristic of a Christian ought to be their gentleness. What an awesome command for today when you have people everywhere demanding that we be first and that our benefit outweigh the benefits of others in a very aggressive and brash sort of way. The gentleness that we ought to look to is found in II Corinthians 10:1 where we hear Paul say: "I

myself, Paul, appeal to you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ.” Jesus is the example of gentleness that we ought to pursue.

We have a whole series of suffering servant Scriptures in Isaiah that describe our Messiah, our Lord as one who was humble and meek, did not break a bruised reed. You don’t hear this from many pulpits today, but when you are living your life, especially in this time where so much is unknown, be gentle with each other. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. Don’t insist, don’t put down your flag and defend it while you just really aren’t sure. God doesn’t need us to defend Him, but rather He does want us to be gentle.

The third approach to life in the midst of apostolic suffering Paul tells us in vs.6 is do not worry. Anxiety has been the hallmark of the pandemic and it has not left the church unscathed. When you make decisions out of fear, when you operate out of fear, then you make decisions that are not of God and worry becomes the driving force. I was speaking with someone this past week and we talked about how 9-11 had changed us from people who were somewhat carefree to people who made decisions based on fear as opposed to openness and giving people the benefit of the doubt like we used to. We agreed that this time of the pandemic has exacerbated that tendency to approach life and each other with even more fear. That is not healthy. We read in Scripture that perfect love casts out all fear. Jesus does not want us to live in a mindset of fear.

There are so many Scriptures that point to teachings that remind us that worry is a great enemy. Look at Matthew 5:34 and the verses before that where Jesus tells us: “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” It is easy to get paralyzed by focusing on the anxiety and the worry that is around us and so we do things and make decisions just for the sake of protecting ourselves and not for the sake of experiencing the fullness of the presence of God. We are called to be vigilant, we are called to use the resources that we have at our disposal to understand the science of the best practices of what is happening around us, but we are not called to be anxious. Vigilant, yes, but anxious no.

So far we have Paul telling us to live our lives in the midst of these difficult times by first of all having an attitude an approach to life which is covered with rejoicing. Secondly that we are to be gentle. Third if you find yourself at night with your mind racing and worried about tomorrow, and worried about what might come next, Paul tells us not to worry. Do not worry, God is still and always has been in control of what comes next. The fourth element to living the life that God wants us to live during this time is Paul states in vs.6 that in prayer we ought to let our requests be made known to God.

Prayer in the midst of the pandemic is something that we probably have not focused on nearly enough. We have had entire sermon series that have lasted for months on prayer. We have described prayer as the lifeline, as the umbilical cord between us and God. If that cord is broken off then then we die. We have had periodic times of regular prayer meetings here at the church. I have normally had prayer before the pandemic at 7 on Tuesday mornings. We are going to start that again. We will be praying for God to bring about a victory that He has already claimed. Paul refers to making known to God our supplications. Again, these words are echoings of Jesus words when he states in Matthew 7:7-8 seek etc.

Finally, Paul tells us that if we are able to rejoice, if we are gentle, if we don't spend all our time worrying and being anxious, if we pray without ceasing, then peace will follow. Not just any peace, but a peace that passes all understanding. Look at the wording that he uses. Not only will you experience peace but God will actively put a guard in place to protect that peace that is a part of your life. This is a military term for someone standing sentry and making sure that nothing and no one will be able to disturb that peace that is now a part of your Christian DNA. Are you rejoicing, are you gentle, have you cast aside anxiety, are you praying, then God will make peace your overriding sense of being. A peace that passes all understanding and that finds its home and source in Jesus Christ our Savior. Peace is God's way of being, His MO, and it ought to be ours too.

You should have all received a palm leaf in the mail. Don't throw it away. We will be bringing that back in the Sunday when we are back without masks and without social distancing. It will happen and it will be a sign for us that God has remained faithful even in the midst of all that we have been through. In the meantime, follow that which Scripture commands us. Rejoice, be gentle, don't worry, pray, and peace will be with you forever. Amen.