***PRAY WITH JOY!***

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Texts: Philippians 1:1-11 and Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7

How do you pray, when you pray, if you pray in this Advent season? In the portion of Paul’s letter to the Philippians that we just read, Paul says, “*I am constantly* ***praying with joy*** *in every one of my prayers for all of you*.” Now from time to time we speak of *singing with joy* or *shouting with joy* or *worshiping with joy* (as we say in our mission statement) or even *serving with joy*, but rarely do we hear about *praying with joy*. Yet that is exactly what Paul writes to the Philippians, “*I am constantly* ***praying with joy*** *in every one of my prayers for all of you*.” What might that look like, to pray with joy?

I suspect that it looks a little like the difference between those who wake up in the morning and say, “*Good morning, Lord!*” and those who wake up in the morning and say, “*Good Lord, it’s morning!*’ It is an attitude with which we approach prayer, which means it is an attitude with which we approach God. So many of our prayers are brought to God from anxious minds or hearts weighed down by worry, and God stands ready to hear all those prayers. But what joy it must bring to God’s heart to hear prayers lifted heavenward with a joyful or awestruck spirit! “*Dear God*, writes little Eugene, “*I didn’t think orange went with purple until I saw the sunset you made on Tuesday. That was cool!*” In that simple prayer are joy, awe, and wonder not only at what was seen but also at the God who made it all. “*Dear God*,” writes young Jeff, “*it is great the way you always get the stars in the right places. Why can’t you do that with the moon?*” Why indeed? And why can’t we approach God more often with unbridled joy and wonder, like those young boys, or as we do from time to time in hymns that are prayers:

*Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love…*

*O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder,*

*consider all the world thy hands have made…*

*then sings my soul, my Savior God to thee, How great thou art!*

Christmas is a season of joy and Advent a season of expectant joy; our prayers in this season should express something of the joy we are experiencing day to day in this season. For it is God, the One to whom we pray, who is the reason that we find so much joy in this season. The joy of Christmas is the joy of a child born in Bethlehem who is Christ the Lord, and if we truly regard his birth as tidings of great joy for all people, including us – as the angel said – then our prayers should be full of that joy, not ***only*** in these Advent days, but ***especially*** in these Advent days.

I am not suggesting that we ignore the reality of the pain and suffering in the world around us. That too deserves our attention and prayers. But I am suggesting that there is and needs to be room for joy in our prayers day to day, notwithstanding the grim realities of school shootings and omicron variants. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is written from prison, yet his imprisonment does not discourage him from praying with joy. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was himself imprisoned in Tegel, a German prison, for his role in a plot to assassinate Hitler, ministered to guards and other prisoners alike before his execution in 1945. In a letter to his parents from that prison a week before Christmas 1943, he writes:

*For a Christian there is nothing peculiarly difficult about Christmas in a prison cell. I daresay it will have more meaning and will be observed with greater sincerity here in this prison than in places where all that survives of the feast is its name. That misery, suffering, poverty, loneliness, helplessness and guilt look very different to the eyes of God from what they do to man, that God should come down to the very place which men usually abhor, that Christ was born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn – these are things which a prisoner can understand better than anyone else. For the prisoner the Christmas story is glad tidings in a very real sense. And that faith gives the prisoner a part in the communion of saints, a fellowship transcending the bounds of time and space and reducing the months of confinement here to insignificance.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

Bonhoeffer echoes Paul’s determination that imprisonment could not stifle the joy he felt in the promises of God and the relationships he enjoyed with kindred spirits for whom the birth of a savior was indeed good news. If they could find joy in the harsh conditions in which they lived day to day, how is it that we find so much difficulty in expressing our joy to God in the midst of the relative comfort of our lives? Is there any less joy to embrace, any fewer tidings of great joy for all people to celebrate, any less reason to offer to God our joy-filled prayers?

Prayer is conversation with God, and so we should share our joy with God as readily as we share our sorrows and concerns – as Paul did, as Bonhoeffer did, as starry-eyed children so often do as Christmas draws nigh. And we are assured that God hears those prayers. It will not be like the resident of Hillsborough, CA who set out with his wife and children to sing carols for their neighbors. As they were tuning up outside the first house, a woman came to the door looking harried. “Look, I’m just too busy. The plumbing is on the blink. I can’t get anybody to fix it, and there’s a mob coming for dinner. If you really feel like carol singing, come back at nine o’clock. “Yes, ma’am,” replied Bing Crosby as he herded his family elsewhere![[2]](#endnote-2) God is never so harried, never so busy, never so impatient with us that we need to reschedule our prayers. We only need to raise them – in voice, or in silence, or in sighs too deep for words, or even with a whispered, Glory! For you will recall the angels who appeared to the shepherds at the time of Jesus’ birth sang their joyful praise, “Glory to God in the highest!” Our joy might find similar expression when we know not what to say, but want simply to share with God the joy that is held in our hearts. *Glory to you, God!*

In those classic Christmas words spoken by the prophet Isaiah we hear a prophecy that is filled with hope and joy:

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest. (Isaiah 9:2-3)*

The source of all that joy is the prophecy of a child who is to be born, the One who will be called “*Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*.” The birth of a child is a time of great joy for the family, but the birth of this child of whom Isaiah speaks is a time of great joy for the whole nation, for all people! In the birth of Jesus that prophecy is fulfilled as God’s everlasting light shines in the streets of Bethlehem. Angels sing! A star shines! And most of the world sleeps in sweet oblivion of what is taking place.

Our celebration of that birth two thousand years later is our joyful declaration that the world is oblivious no more. Our voices are joined to the voices of the angels in praising God with joyful glorias! The news of Jesus’ birth is good news to be proclaimed for all the world to hear. In this Advent season we prepare for the joyful celebration of God’s coming among us. But we also prepare for his return in glory. That day may seem shrouded in mystery and chaos with more than a hint of fear and foreboding, to use Jesus’ words from last Sunday’s Gospel reading, but it is also a day for us to anticipate with hope-filled joy. In Advent we prepare to celebrate Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, but we also prepare for his return – the day of the Lord, or as Paul calls it in his letter to the Philippians, the day of Christ. How would Paul have us prepare for that day – with joy and with love! Eugene Peterson (no relation) paraphrases well Paul’s prayer for that church and for us in that Philippians passage:

*So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but (love) well. Learn to love appropriately. You need to use your head and test your feelings so that your love is sincere and intelligent, not sentimental gush. Live a lover’s life, circumspect and exemplary, a life Jesus will be proud of: bountiful in fruits from the soul, making Jesus Christ attractive to all, getting everyone involved in the glory and praise of God.[[3]](#endnote-3)*

What Paul urges in his letter and in his prayer is that we who follow Christ live with genuine love and great joy, with loving lives that will bring joy to the heart of God and Christ and our neighbors!

In this Advent season and beyond this Advent season, join your voices with the voices of the angels, saying and praying:

Glory to God in the highest!

And on earth, peace – love – and joy – lots of joy,

to all God’s people on earth! Amen

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer quoted by John Sonnenday from *Letters & Papers from Prison*, December 17, 1943 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Herb Caen, *One Man’s San Francisco* quoted by James A. Simpson *in All About Christmas*, Gordon Wright Publishing, 1994, p.24 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, NavPress:2002, p.2136 [↑](#endnote-ref-3)