

I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy...
Philippians 2:1-11, 4:4-13
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Rejoice in the Lord, always, again I will say, rejoice! What wonderful, joyous words! What a wonderful way to begin worship, and what powerful words to hear read from the Bible today. And what meaningful words for Paul's friends in Phillipi to hear as well.

Unlike many of Paul's letters, which include numerous references to conflicts and disagreements among early believers, the conflicts in Phillipi receive only a small mention in the letter's final chapter. Instead, Paul's words are warm and loving instruction, filled with reminders of how to live, how to be church, and how to follow Christ Jesus.

Paul's joyous tone and his joy-filled words seem to flow from the pen effortlessly...very curious once we realize that Paul writes this letter from a prison cell. So Paul tells his followers to rejoice...and he assures them that he rejoices and will continue to rejoice. But what reason does Paul have to rejoice in prison?

Especially because it looks like Paul's days may be numbered. He has been imprisoned for spreading the gospel. He faces a trial and possibly an execution. No reason to rejoice there. It's also unlikely that prison was particularly cushy in the Roman Empire. Paul is used to being in prison – the book of Acts describes three imprisonments – but, even if Paul is hearty enough to overlook the lack of creature comforts, surely he must be frustrated by the indignity and humiliation of jail.

Paul, however, looks past his present sufferings and focuses squarely on the good news – the gospel message is spreading. The church everywhere is growing. And Paul's imprisonment – rather than impeding his mission, is actually helping. Listen to what Paul says –

“I want to report to you, friends, that my imprisonment here has had the opposite of its intended effect. Instead of being squelched, the Message has actually prospered. All the soldiers here, and everyone else, too, found out that I'm in jail because of this Messiah. That piqued their curiosity, and now they've learned all about him. Not only that, but most of the followers of Jesus here have become more sure of themselves in the faith than ever, speaking out fearlessly about God, about the Messiah.” (Phil 1:12-14 – translation, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson)

Paul has a job to do – to proclaim the gospel – and he is going to do it, wherever he may find himself. So when Paul lands in jail, he sees it as an opportunity to do his job. He does it so well that even the prison guards are inspired to learn more about

Jesus. This shows why Paul is such a threat to the entire Roman empire. The powers-that-be believe that imprisoning Paul will end this threat. But does it? No! The gospel is too big! Even in prison, Paul wins converts for Christ. Even in prison, Paul writes words so powerful that they will inspire for 2000 years! And that is reason to rejoice.

Those who try to stand in the way of God's mission often find that their actions have the opposite effect. You may recall the Christian Peacemakers who were held hostage in Iraq nearly three years ago. In the *Christian Century* ("Cell group." July 24, 2007, 22-26), peacemaker James Loney reminisced about his fellow prisoner Tom Fox, the American Quaker who was ultimately executed by their captors. Loney describes Tom as a man who "turned his captivity into a sustained, unbroken meditation" (22).

Tom Fox had a job to do, and he did it with single-minded focus. His job was prayer. Loney writes that Tom used his chains like a rosary, praying for everyone – other peacemakers...his captors... people impacted when a bomb exploded outside the window. Tom Fox doesn't exactly rejoice – Loney writes that their conditions were harsh – but "Tom's prayers brought our suffering into dialogue with the vast suffering of the world" (23). Tom's God-given mission was bigger than captivity.

Similarly, from a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, Martin Luther King Jr. challenged northern clergy who said that the civil rights movement was too radical to be Christian ("Letter from a Birmingham Jail," *The Christian Century*, April 16, 1963.). The powers-that-be contained Dr. King, but not his words. King also had a God-given mission – civil rights achieved through non-violence – and arrest did not constrain him. Nor did it change him or the nature of his mission – he and his fellow prisoners insisted on saying grace together before meals, even though police denied them food if they did so. King must rejoice to know that his words continue to inspire.

Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was imprisoned by the Nazis for collaborating in an assassination attempt against Hitler. In captivity, Bonhoeffer meditated on what it means to be a Christian, concluding that it is participating, along with God, in the world's suffering that makes us Christian (*Letters and Papers From Prison*, Collins Fontana Books, 1953, 122 -125). Suffering for the gospel was, for Bonhoeffer, part of his God-given mission. He was ultimately executed, but we still tell his story and read the letters he wrote from his prison cell. I believe that Bonhoeffer rejoices in this.

I'm not trying to glorify prison or to advocate for martyrdom, because none of these people set out to be arrested. They set out to do the work God called them to do, and they refused to let prison stop them. In some strange way, the fact that they are

imprisoned by the powers and principalities of their times shows just how dangerous their message is. And the fact that their stories live on, show that prison didn't stop them. The gospel is stronger than any kind of prison that human beings can construct.

I can't imagine that this made it easier for any of them. I imagine that Paul had moments of weakness, where his bravado left him and he realized just how precarious his situation was. Being willing to die for the gospel is one thing...but I imagine that late at night in his cell, Paul would ask God – isn't there a different way? An easier way?

But Paul has a role model in Jesus – Jesus, who has been where Paul is right now. Jesus too was a threat to the powers-that-be. Jesus also endured prison and torture and humiliation and Jesus suffered and died. So Paul says he can endure all things through Jesus Christ, who strengthens him (4:13), and Paul is sustained by the words of a familiar hymn to Christ. The words Dick read to us earlier were most likely a description of Christ used in worship, set to music, to help early followers know exactly who they were following. The hymn goes something like this:

Jesus was God, but he did not exploit his equality with God. Instead, Jesus emptied himself and became human, like a slave. He humbled himself further and became obedient to the point of death on a cross. For this, God exalted Jesus and calls Jesus Lord. So that at the name of Jesus, every knee will bend, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (2:6-11).

These words are very familiar to me as well. You enjoyed a brief taste of our Vacation Bible School songs this morning...Sally McDonald and I have been teaching these songs to the children all week and I cannot get them from my mind. I fervently hope God does not call me to endure prison for the sake of the gospel! And, when God does call me to dark and difficult places, I would like to think that I would be sustained by music a little more sophisticated than the Power Lab songs from Vacation Bible School. And yet, these songs do just what they are supposed to do – they teach children (and remind us) of the things that we know to be true about God, and they teach them in a way that is easy to remember – dare I say impossible to forget. So that if we find ourselves in a tough place, these words return to us.

And that's exactly what we find in the other stories we just heard. Martin Luther King wrote of the story of Daniel who endures the lion's den rather than worship the emperor – that sustained him. Tom Fox and his fellow captives in Iraq recalled their favorite Bible passages and discussed what they meant to them here and now – that gave them sustenance.

For Paul, this song tells him why he endures. *Jesus has been where Paul is now...and Jesus died.* But because of that, Jesus is now Lord of all! And Paul needs to make sure that everyone knows and joins him in confessing that Jesus is Lord.

And so after Paul makes this clear to his friends, he finally mentions the crisis in the church. There is a quarrel in Philippi, a disagreement between two women leaders who Paul says have struggled alongside him for the sake of the gospel. Although this quarrel is one of Paul's primary purposes in writing the letter, he does not explicitly mention it until his final paragraphs. Why? Because Paul has been giving them the answer to the problem all along.

For the Philippians, it is now clear that their disagreements – however important the issues might be – pale in comparison to Paul's example. Their mission is to stand firm alongside one another and share the gospel. As long as there are some people in the world who do not confess Jesus as Lord, they don't have time for quarrels. Their work is not done. At the same time, Paul does not tell them to feel bad about this. He tells them to rejoice! He reminds them that the Christian life is one of great joy, and that their community must end this quarrel so that they can all rejoice together in their work.

But what about us? It's likely that few of us anticipate being jailed for being activists for peace, civil rights, or against Nazism, so how do Paul's words apply to us?. Well, first, I acknowledge that I don't have a sense of mission or purpose that is quite as clear as Paul's. And perhaps because of that, I often forget to heed Paul's call. I forget to rejoice.

I imagine that many of us are so caught up in the day-to-day, that we don't stop to think, "Am I leading a life that is joyous? Joy-filled? Am I allowing my heart to sing? My mind to race? And my whole self to rejoice? Even in worship. We come to worship for many reasons, I think one of which is that we know God and want to experience God here. But sometimes we find ourselves so focused on the day-to-day that we forget to really rejoice in the time that we have to focus single-mindedly on God and our community.

Preacher Tom Long writes that people of faith should begin each day by asking the question, "What can I do today that would be joyful?" (*Testimony*, 70). Long suggests that many of us instead ask, "What do I *want* to do today?" or "what do I *have* to do today."

Paul and Tom Long both remind us that Christians are called to joy! We may have been tricked into believing that Christianity is about being serious or pious, but at its heart, our religion is about joy. Joy in God. Joy in eternal life gained for us by Jesus Christ. Joy in each other. Joy in living the Christian life. We believe that life has deeper purpose, and that is reason to rejoice.

And joy is different than pleasure. There are a lot of things in life that are fun, pleasant, even enjoyable, and yet they don't bring us pure joy. Going to the movies is a lot of fun – going out for ice cream afterwards makes it even better – but that isn't

the joy that I mean. Paul is talking about the sheer joy that comes from having a really important mission – to proclaim that Jesus is Lord, and to persuade others to proclaim the same.

Paul rejoices that his mission is succeeding, but he does not tell us that he rejoices in being in prison. I imagine that many of you who recently celebrated graduations in your family would agree that that was a day of great joy – even if students do not consider final exams and term papers to be a cause for rejoicing. And many parents say that the moment they delivered a baby was the most joyous one of their lives...but no woman describes labor and childbirth as a good time.

So Paul reminds us to focus on the mission...the outcome...and to remember to rejoice along the way. Not to rejoice because of suffering, but to know that even bad times cannot de-rail the gospel mission. The Roman Empire could imprison Paul...even kill him...but they could not imprison the message and they could not contain his words. Paul knew this --- because he had learned it from Christ Jesus, who *not even death could contain*. And that my friends, is reason enough to rejoice. AMEN.