

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's rather odd, when you think about it, having a Sunday where the name is a command, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice" and then you hear the Gospel reading where John the Baptist is in prison. Even more than that, you know that he will eventually be killed for his faithfulness to the Lord. But God does say, "Rejoice in the Lord always." That means he calls you to rejoice not just in times where there is great joy but even when you are in prison, facing death for the sake of the word of God. So it is, the Lord says through the pen of St. Paul, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

The thing about rejoicing, then, is it draws you outside of yourself and situates your joy in something or someone else. There's a problem when you forget this and make joy into something you experience or something akin to being happy or a feeling of excitement. Those things, to be sure, can go along with joy and often do but rejoicing and joy are far deeper and meaningful than something that is a high which here one minute and gone the next.

In prison, Matthew records, John sent his disciples to ask a question of Jesus and you are told the question along with the response, "When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?'" Over the years people have debated whether John was doubting that Jesus was the Christ. Is this question for his sake or for the sake of his disciples? Traditionally it has been held that John was not doubting but this was for his disciples to hear. Regardless, though, if John had any doubts or none, he still benefited from the answer Jesus gave. Jesus proclaimed to the disciples of John who he is as the promised Messiah and in that answer because it points to Jesus, there is joy.

Matthew goes on when he wrote, "And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.'" Jesus was and is who he said he was, and he was and is what the prophets said he would be. In these words, God's faithfulness is shown. The Lord kept his word to his people. The promised one who would deliver his people had come. He is the one who confirmed who is with miracles such as giving sight to the blind, giving mobility to the lame, hearing to the deaf, cleansing lepers, raising the dead, and preaching the good news that the poor in spirit would inherit the Kingdom of God, which is where true riches, eternal riches are found.

For John the Baptist, this is what he had been preaching. He was pointing people to Jesus. He was calling them to repentance; to turn from their sin and fix their eyes on the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was pointing them to the one who even raises the dead as Jesus himself would lay down his own life and raise it up again on the third day. And for John, who would die because of what he said for the sake of God, that's reason to rejoice.

When you hear these words of God spoken to you what does this all mean? Where are you to look? Well, follow the example of John and his disciples. What is it? Listen to Jesus. What does he say? He says to you, you are baptized into Christ. Everything that was promised by the

prophets and fulfilled in Jesus belongs to you. You see, that means everything. In Romans 5, a pivotal chapter of that Epistle, God says, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” This is what forms not just your understanding of joy and rejoicing but it gives it to you.

“Rejoice in the Lord always”. God commands you to do that, but he also gives you the reason and substance of that joy. Fixing your eyes on Christ crucified and risen you see that your sin is forgiven, and you stand righteous before the throne of God. That’s first and foremost and defines every aspect of your life as you go through this world. It’s no wonder, then, when you look at a word like “rejoice” in the New Testament it is often in the context of experiencing times of suffering. Romans 5 also says this about rejoicing, “Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.” Listen to the words, God calls you to look to Christ and see what you have now in him and what awaits you in the future.

As Christians in this world looking toward the Last Day, this is all so vitally important. The devil is prowling around, and he wants you to find joy in the things of this world which will pass away and not remain as Jesus told you in the Gospel reading last week when he said, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.” And then do you remember what he said right after that? Jesus said, “But watch yourselves lest your hearts be weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you suddenly like a trap.”

Jesus knows you and the dangers to your faith in him you face. Your sinful flesh, which is grass as the Old Testament reading teaches, wants to find joy in yourself too and that’s just as deadly. That false joy is always pursuing and never satisfied. It’s always looking for something bigger and more pleasurable. Joy is held before you like a carrot always out of reach and your life becomes consumed and enslaved to the elementary principles of this world and you have run away from Christ and where true joy and freedom are really found. Even in the church, God’s people are tempted to find joy in the latest fads and gimmicks of the world and not be content with God’s word and the faith and practice which has been handed down to her through the ages. It leads to a view of Christ, his word, and his church that thinks it needs to suit your needs to be relevant to your life or it must entice you in some way like some salesman desperate for your business. Or a woman trying to turn herself into someone she is not to be more attractive, she thinks, all according to worldly standards so that she will find joy in a man who loves her not for who she is but what she has turned herself into. This is all nothing new, though, Jesus asked a similar question to the people about when they went into the wilderness to hear John the Baptist preach. Did they just want a show or to be entertained or did they want to listen to a prophet and more than a prophet, the one promised by God in the line of Elijah to prepare the way of the Son of God?

Listen to the Lord and heed his call. Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand. Know who you are as God's word confronts you in your sin. Don't be fooled but stay awake. Go running to Christ for forgiveness and rejoicing in what Christ has done for you and the new life he gives you for the devil, the world, and your fallen flesh tempt you to run away from God and turn God's word into the unloving bad guy who doesn't care about you or your life. Say "no" to all those things because at the end of the day when you give into temptation, wherever and from whomever it may come you will find there is no real lasting joy. God calls you and all people to repentance because he desires that you live, he desires that you have and now true joy found in Christ.

Jesus says clearly in the Gospel reading today, "blessed is the one who not offended by me." If Jesus and God's word offends you, you are the problem, not God. If you don't find joy in the word of God, and the faithful proclamation of it and the faithful practice of it in the church, God is not the problem. Joy isn't found in yourself, but joy is found and known when you look outside of yourself and look at Christ. Will you always see this as "joy" well, not in an emotional sense as the world describes joy and has taught us to understand it. But you when you see Jesus and when you see that he has done all for your salvation and see that you have been given eternal life and he will guard and keep you in this forever, wow, then there is lasting joy. This is your baptismal life. Live out your baptism which daily drowns the old man and lives in the new life you have been given. God calls you to rejoice in the Lord always. He calls you to look to him at times.

And you know, the more you look to Christ and outside of yourself the more joy you see and find yourself rejoicing in any and every circumstance. It happens and God does grant you to see this joy in the faith he has given to you. God's word becomes something for you as you go through this life too, it's comfort because you see God's faithfulness to his promises, he has made to you, and you know that each day the Lord is faithful and will always be faithful. You start to define your life by what God says and if called to suffer all even death for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom, then so be it you do it rejoicing every step of the way and until your last breath on this earth because you know you will be rejoicing before the throne of God forever with all of God's saints rejoicing with you.

Take heart dear people of God this day. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand." People of God, it's Advent. The Lord has come, he comes to you now, and he is coming again. The day for rejoicing is here. Jesus has redeemed you by his blood and you are an heir of eternal life. Always remember that and cling to it. Christ is yours and you are his forever. What a joy that is to know this and have this and to confess this in the world. You are Christian and in times of great happiness you rejoice. In times of great sorrow, you rejoice. In the humdrum day to day things of this life, you rejoice. When death stares at you and your life on this side of the grave is coming to an end, you rejoice.

Why do you rejoice. "And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.'" That's why you rejoice and in whom you find your joy. Jesus has come. He's here now so listen to him, take and eat his very

body and blood given and shed for you. Rejoice in him and rejoice as you look forward to that day when he comes again not in the lowliness of the manger or hidden in means but when he comes again in great glory as only, he can do. Rejoice in the Lord always. He is at hand. People of God rejoice, and come, Lord Jesus!

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.