



**VILLAGE  
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

# Rejoice in the Lord... Always?

SCRIPTURE:  
1 Philippians 4:4-7

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November 28, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Melanie Hardison

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**O**ne of my favorite things about this time of year has always been coming into church on the first Sunday of Advent. I love the lights and greenery and music. As a kid, I felt like I had waited all year for Christmas. But I knew that once Christmas came to church, well, Christmas was getting close.

I especially love the Advent wreath. The four candles on the wreath represent... what? (You know this: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love.) One for each Sunday of Advent. This year, while our readings each week will focus on those themes, our sermon series—which begins today—focuses on joy: Joy When You Need It Most.

This year, don't we all need a little more joy? And don't we all love coming into church even more than usual? This time last year, we weren't able to be in this Sanctuary. We weren't able to gather around tables, either the Communion table or the dinner table. And this first Sunday is extra special (for me) because it marks two years that I've been at Village. Two years of mostly pandemic-time, but two years in which you all have brought me joy. Even as I've sat with some of you in your deepest pain and grief, your hopes and longings, you all have been an inspiration and a joy. This church is a joy.

In our scripture reading today, the Apostle Paul is writing about joy to a church in Philippi in ancient Greece because the Philippians... well, they weren't having such a joyful time. There were some difficulties, so Paul is writing to them from prison, and his letter becomes this short book of the Bible and that's where our scripture comes from: Philippians 4.

We're not clear what's going on; there's some kind of discord or arguing. Paul doesn't say exactly. But he does give them advice that is wisdom for the ages—wisdom for us. He says: Rejoice in the Lord al-

ways... Let your gentleness be known... God is near... Don't worry but pray instead... And God's peace will be with you.

Paul is encouraging them, helping them take the high road, to come out of their troubles and see the bigger picture. He wants them to touch joy, gentleness and prayer. If they set their minds on these things, he says, God's peace will come to them and it will be a peace that surpasses all understanding.

Now when I went to Presbyterian summer camp in my youth, we sang a little song about this scripture. Maybe you know it, too; sing it with me. It goes like this, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice. Rejoice, rejoice, and again I say rejoice. Rejoice, rejoice, and again I say rejoice." This bright little tune often got stuck in my head. But you know what I realized? If I was feeling down and I sang this song, well, I could feel just a bit better.

Of course, a peppy little camp song doesn't solve anything. Sometimes life is just way too hard. There are things in life that can shake our foundation and joy can seem nowhere to be found.

And this is where I've had to do some reckoning with Paul. He says "Rejoice in the Lord always." Always? Really? Come on, Paul, that's not realistic. Don't tell me to rejoice when the world is falling apart. But as I've grown in my faith, I've come to believe that there is always a reason to rejoice. Sometimes we have to look for it and sometimes we have to choose joy. But joy can always be found—in some form or another.

Now, I'm not talking about the big joys of life, like falling in love or adopting a baby, the obvious stuff. I'm not even talking about how joy shows up in little, everyday ways. Like a week ago, a friend of mine was getting ready to be on vacation for all of

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Thanksgiving week. When she completed her last task at the office and put on her “away” message—you know, the one that says, “Sorry I missed you, I’ll be back in 10 days”—she described that moment as ‘sheer joy.’ Which it is.

What I’m talking about are the times in life when we feel so mired in our difficulties, so desperate or despairing, that joy seems to have completely vacated the premises. It is in these times that we may need to open ourselves a little and allow ourselves to take in the smallest joys that might come or even to make a conscious decision to choose joy.

In the TV show, “Ted Lasso,” there’s a character named Dani Rojas. Dani is a soccer player from Mexico who comes to England to play for a professional team. And, of course, in England, soccer is called... football. And in Spanish, football is futbol. Dani is a joyful soul and he has this mantra: Futbol is life! He says it all the time. For Dani Rojas, futbol is life and futbol is joy.

Well, one day, something tragic happens. Dani is in the middle of a really important match and he goes to score a goal. Except the team’s mascot, a greyhound named Earl, is on the sidelines and a pigeon flies onto the field. Earl breaks free of his handler, runs on to the field to get the pigeon, and gets hit by the ball Dani has just kicked. Right there, in front of a stadium full of people, Earl doesn’t make it.

As you can imagine, Dani, this star player, is traumatized with guilt. He gets into a horrible rut and can’t play worth anything. His coaches are trying to help him, his teammates are trying to help him, nothing can help him get his game back. So the coach calls in a therapist, Dr. Sharon, to work with Dani. After just one session with Dr. Sharon, everything changes. Let’s watch a clip from the show.

Futbol is life; futbol is also death. And futbol is sometimes just futbol. But mostly, futbol is life! Dani Rojas comes to a new understanding and makes a choice for joy. He chooses to see futbol as life instead of death.

Another thing that I’ve come to believe about joy—and we have Tom Are to thank for some of this language in his new book—is that even on our worst days, even if we’re not choosing it, joy has a way of finding us, if only we’re open to it. And when we’re

open to it, that little bit of joy can make all the difference.

Sixteen years ago, my father died of leukemia, three days before Thanksgiving. In a week when he should have been brining a turkey and my mom should have been making cornbread dressing and I should have been sitting next to my grandmother snapping green beans, instead we spent those days working with the funeral home, writing an obituary, and meeting with the pastor to plan a funeral. I don’t recall that Thanksgiving as a joyful one. But when I look back, joy was there, in the tiniest of moments. We all hugged each other a little tighter. My mom’s colleagues organized a huge Thanksgiving meal which they left at our front door. Our friend, Grace, showed up holding a big bottle of wine and said, “You’re busy and you don’t need me to stay, but I thought you could use this.” And my dad wanted to be buried, not cremated, so God bless the pastor, musicians, and church folks just like you who made a funeral happen the day after Thanksgiving and surrounded us with love.

But I tell you, the ultimate joy came in the quiet moments, when through the tears, we gave thanks to God that my father was no longer suffering from leukemia, that he was free of pain and a body that could no longer serve him. We gave thanks to God that he had found eternal peace, everlasting rest, the joy of heaven, and reunion with his parents, and my cousin, Lee, and the saints who’ve gone before. Those moments were joy and it was there in the wake of my father’s death that I learned to do as Paul says: To count my blessings, to recognize the good that does show up, and to rejoice in the Lord always.

As Tom said about love a few weeks ago: love isn’t only something you feel, it’s something you do. I think joy is a lot like that, too. It isn’t only something we feel, it’s something we do, it’s something we can find, if we’re open to it, and sometimes, it’s even something we can choose.

Each year, this church delivers several hundred poinsettias to homebound church members who can’t make it to church. And each year, we get cards and phone calls thanking us—thanking you. People thank us for the poinsettias, yes. But mostly they thank us, they thank you, for bringing Christmas

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joy into their homes. Some aren't physically able to decorate for Christmas, or don't have families to decorate for them, and this one pot of flowers from the church may be their only Christmas decoration.

But you know what we also hear, from the folks who do the delivering, is that taking these flowers brings them Christmas joy. It's a simple act of kindness, to purchase one of these flowers in memory of someone, or to share your time in dropping it by someone's home or nursing home. It's a simple way to choose joy. And it's a reminder that we can choose joy every day.

So friends, believe this good news, that if nothing else gives us reason to rejoice, our faith and our in-

terconnectedness in the faith give us reason. Paul is on to something when he says, "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Rejoice in the Lord—because God loves you.

Rejoice in the Lord—because you can pray instead of worry.

Rejoice in the Lord—for the blessings we do have.

Rejoice in the Lord—that we have the ability to choose joy.

Rejoice in the Lord—because this church family is with you wherever you are.

Rejoice in the Lord always because God so loved the world that God came to earth to dwell among us, in the form of a baby in a manger. Amen.