

December 14, 2003
Advent 3

"The Candle of Joy Always Burns Brightly"

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This morning our acolyte Stephen Trevarrow lit the third candle on the Advent wreath. It was the pink candle, also called the candle of joy, or the shepherd's candle. All of us sitting here this morning want greater joy in our lives. We want the candle of joy to burn brightly and illuminate every part of our lives. The problem with this time of the year is this blessing of joy the Lord has for us gets buried under a mountain of anxieties and worries. Problems and troubles in your family and personal life just don't go away because this is the month of December as we wish each other "Merry Christmas." In fact it seems there are added problems, extra financial burdens, extra loneliness, extra guilt, and even more anxiety and stress as we count off the days until Christmas.

Whether the sun is shining brightly and the lights are turned up, or whether we are in the darkness of night, the light from this pink candle is always the same. This morning we want to use these words from Philippians to show you how the joy you have in the Lord in the Lord never changes. We want to speak to this subject: **"The Candle of Joy Always Shines Brightly."**

1) Always rejoice

The candle of joy burns so brightly in your life because you can rejoice in the Lord whatever the situation might. "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." If you read the verses before this you find that Paul is trying to help two close friends, Euodia and Sytyche with a tough problem. In no uncertain terms he tells them to get over their spat and get along with each other in the Lord. Imagine how these two ladies with their cat claws out must have felt while this was being read! The key to getting along with people and not clawing them or even yourself during these stressful days of the holiday season is to "Rejoice in the Lord always!" The hardest person to get along with in your life is not your husband, not your wife, not your mom and dad, not your brother in sister, not even the neighbor across the street that is mean to you. It is yourself. The more you rejoice in the Lord and his blessings, the less you will be yanked around by sinful behavior in yourself and in other people.

The joy you have in the Lord can be seen in what Paul tells us when he says simply, "The Lord is near!" Let me illustrate what this means by telling a story of a visit we made to the Grand Canyon about ten years ago. My wife and two youngest children had never seen the Grand Canyon. The neat thing about driving to the Grand Canyon is that you do not see it until you get to the edge of it. I parked the car, had them close their eyes, and then

led them by the hand to the edge, and then told them to open their eyes. The sight was so glorious my wife broke into tears.

We are living on the edge, always on the edge of unbelievable blessings, because the Lord is near. The beauty and glory of the Grand Canyon is infinitesimally small compared to the majesty and glory and wonder of God taking on our flesh and blood, being born in Bethlehem and laid in a manger in swaddling clothes. The Lord is near, so near, so close, so real, as real as the flesh, blood, skin, bones and hair your bodies possess. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory."

The Lord is near. We stand on our tiptoes to see him coming right around the corner, coming in judgment and coming in clouds of glory. We find ourselves praying over and over again, "Lord Jesus come, come quickly." This eager anticipation of Jesus' return does not lead to wildly running around, yelling and screaming, "Jesus is coming, Jesus is coming." It leads instead to moderation, or gentleness, and calmness and peace and serenity and joy that says everything is going to be OK when Jesus returns, and I know he is coming soon. In fact we can actually laugh at the problems of life by saying, "In the light of eternity does it really matter?"

The Lord is near, so near and always ready to help us, comfort us, hold us and keep us in his loving arms. Don't you love the words you sang this morning when we sung the refrain for Psalm 91, "Keep me, keep me, as the apple of your eye, hide me, hide me in the shadow of your wings" The apple of the eye is the pupil of the eye. The Hebrew word for "apple of the eye" is the word that means "little person." Look into someone's eye closely, and you will see yourself reflected as a little person in that pupil of the eye. How close is Jesus to you, so close that when you look up at him, you see yourself reflected in his eye. The Lord is near. You are the apple of his eye. That's close, real close, and it fills you with joy. He quiets us with his love, our first reading told us from Zephaniah.

If being close to family fills you with joy this holiday season, how much more joy is waiting as you spend your life with Jesus near and close to you. "Nothing will separate you from the love of God that exists in Christ Jesus our Lord." That joy the Lord gives you burns brightly even in the darkest of days.

2) Always request

Your candle burns brightly for another reason. Paul writes, "Do not be anxious for about anything, but in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Wow! Do you mean I don't have to be anxious? I don't have to worry? I can be carefree and turn my fears and worries over to the Lord in prayer? That's what we are being told here in no uncertain terms. What freedom that gives me! What joy! I feel like singing that Christmas carol that says, "How great my joy." Then the echo, "Great my joy." Then the words, "Joy, joy, joy." Then the echo, "joy, joy, joy."

According to statistics, an average person's anxiety is focused 40% on things that will never happen, 30% on things about the past that can't be changed, 12% on things about criticism by others, mostly untrue, 10% about health, which gets worse with stress, 8% about real problems that will be faced. Whether these stats are true or not, there are very

real anxieties and concerns that we face each day, and they seem to loom up larger than reality during this time of the year. Jesus said in Matthew 6, "Therefore do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear." Jesus also told us to turn our worries into prayers when he said, "Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you."

How brightly this candle of joy burns when you think of the privilege set before you in these words, "in everything by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God." Can we offer prayer in everything? Yes, that is what the Lord says. What if I cannot find a parking space in a parking lot? What if I need help getting the shopping done? What if I am having a bad day, and I don't reflect this to those around me? What about a friend in the hospital? Yes, in everything we will pray. But always remember certain things are needed more than others.

The Lord's Prayer helps us with our requests. "Hallowed by thy name." What a prayer that is for me as I go about my daily affairs in my home and in my community. "Lord, let me keep your name holy. Let me reflect your glory. Put a song in my heart in everything I do." Or what about the words, "Thy kingdom come." With this prayer we are asking God to build up his kingdom, even use us to lead others to our Savior's waiting arms. "Thy will be done." That means we are praying for the Lord to get rid of everything in us that keeps his will from being accomplished in our lives.

We come to the Lord, lay our hearts before him and plead with him to help us with the big and little issues of life. As we pray we do so with deepest thanksgiving for all the blessings in our lives. 1 Peter says, "Cast all your care upon him, for he cares for you." How brightly your candle burns tonight, and tomorrow and the next day as you always make use of prayer for yourself and for others and the glory of God's kingdom.

3) Always relax

This candle of joy burns brightly for you this morning, because you can relax in the peace that we have in Jesus. Relax? What do you mean, "relax?" Do you know how much I have to get done this week? Here is why you can relax: "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

A little girl was walking across some slick ice with her dad. She reached up and held on to her father's hand, but then suddenly slipped, fell and went down. She picked herself up, and said, "Daddy, can you hold onto my hand? Then I won't let go." That's what the peace you have in Jesus does for you. It guards your heart and mind. The word for guard is used several times for guarding and protecting a prison. There is nothing more liberating, and more comforting, and more relaxing than knowing the peace that Jesus won for me now guards and controls my heart and mind.

The peace you have in Jesus transcends all human understanding. During this time of the year people speak of peace, but usually in terms of peace between warring nations, or peace in the families. The peace that is mentioned here is a peace that goes beyond human understanding. To grasp this peace we first need to know that we are at war with a holy and righteous God and that we must stand before him on judgment to answer for

our sin. It means knowing that our sin has separated us from God, and made us children of eternal death in hell. When the Bible opens our eyes to see Jesus, we see him as the Prince of Peace. The tiny hands of the baby are the hands of God that will bear the wounds that won our forgiveness and peace that this world cannot understand. "Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." The hands that bear the gaping wounds are the same hands that also protect and keep our hearts and minds in that peace. It is Jesus who said, "My sheep hear my voice, and no one will pluck them from my hand." That allows you to always relax, live in that peace, and let it fill your life. It's a joy that will burn brightly every day of your life. Always rejoice! Always request! Always relax! Shine Advent Candle shine! Shine brightly for me! Amen.