

Psalm 30; Acts 16:11-40

Many years ago PBS ran a series called "Wonders of the African World." It traced Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., on a tour of Africa. Henry Gates, Jr., is an African-American professor at Harvard University who wanted to tour Africa looking for its lost history. When he traveled to South Africa and turned northward, he came to the country of Zimbabwe looking for some lost cities and ancient ruins. He reported about Zimbabwe's most recent history. Zimbabwe had been independent and free now for over 20 years. But before that it was under British rule because of a man named Cecil John Rhodes. Rhodes was a British diamond king and statesman. His goal was to enlarge the British empire from the Cape to Cairo. He was planning for the day when the British would control all South Africa. He forced the people to surrender most of their land to Great Britain. Zimbabwe, along with Zambia, was then called Rhodesia named after Rhodes, this imperialist and prime minister of the Cape Colony.

When Rhodes died his fortune was given for public service as instructed by his will. A large gift to Oxford University set up the Rhodes scholarship for students to come and study at Oxford. In a way it is poetic justice. Rhodes' fortune is being used for Africans and African-Americans and others to have a full scholarship to Oxford University to study.

History is fascinating to me. I never knew this was the history of Rhodesia, that it was named after a British man and was really a colony of Britain. Likewise I never knew the history of Philippi, the town in the New Testament that Paul writes to. It too was a colony and was named after a man. Philippi was a Macedonia city. The history of the site goes back to King Philip II, father of Alexander the Great, who took it from the Thasians about the year 360 BC. King Philip gave the town its name and fortified it. But this Macedonian town came into worldwide prominence when it was the scene of a great battle in 42 BC. The avengers of Julius Caesar won which marked the beginning

of the Roman Empire and when Octavian became the head of state under the title of Augustus, he rebuilt Philippi. This city held the rank of "Colony" which gave it special privileges. It became a settlement of Italian colonists and therefore was favored. Roman law was used in all its local affairs. This meant that the transfer of land, exemption from taxes, local administration and all other business transactions were similar to Rome. In fact the whole legal position of the colonists and the status that made this city the most important in Macedonia was that it was to be thought of as though it was Italian soil itself. In Acts 16:12 it states: "...Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony." It was not the capital but it was known to everyone as being the leading city of all Macedonia. And when Paul came to this city, it became his first connection with Europe.

A special relationship developed between Paul and the Philippian church. He came to Philippi on his second missionary journey believing God had specifically called him to preach in Macedonia. Paul had a vision involving a man pleading with him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Paul had taken this vision to mean he was to go there to tell the Gentiles the good news of Jesus Christ. Thus Paul began his missionary work in Europe. Many were converted and churches were founded in Europe because of this vision. Philippi had few Jewish residents. There were not enough to form a synagogue. The Church in Philippi became a Gentile church and those involved in the church perhaps included Lydia, the Roman jailer, Clement, Euodia, and Syntyche. These are names that we become familiar with in the New Testament church.

Of all the churches Paul had a relationship with, this one seemed to be a favorite. The letter to the Philippians seems to be one of the most personal ones he writes. It is a small epistle, only four chapters long. Paul writes to his good friends in Philippi reporting how he is doing. This church assisted Paul by sending material gifts to help

him in spreading the gospel. Paul rejoices in what they have done for him and encourages them to rejoice as well.

My favorite portion of this letter to the Philippians is chapter four. In reading and re-reading this chapter I begin to understand the deep kind of joy Christians experience because of the many promises of God. One would think Paul would not have much to rejoice in because he is in prison when he writes this letter. But Paul's deep faith and trust in God allows his joy to surface.

I would like to read a portion of Paul's letter to the Philippians from chapter four. I would like to read it from the translation called *The Message* by Eugene Peterson. As I read, think of this letter from Paul being written to our church here in Palmer.

"My dear, dear friends! I love you so much. I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride. Don't waver. Stay on track, steady in God....."

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the center of your life.

Summing it all up, friends, I'd say you'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious -- the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies...."

Beautiful words for us to hear today. There are so many promises of God listed in this chapter that it encourages me to be reminded of them from time to time. As put in the New Revised Standard Version: "Rejoice in the Lord." "The Lord is near." "Do not worry about anything." "The peace of God...will guard your hearts and your minds..." "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." "God will fully satisfy every need of yours..." These promises encourage my faith and remind me when I become discouraged that all this is offered by God. What joy the Philippians must have experienced when they received this letter from Paul.

We hear a lot about Christian joy. It is different than being happy. It is not just a feeling but a deep knowing. It is something more at the root of who we are in Christ. As Evelyn Underhill put it, joy is "creation's response to the infinite loving of God." There are so many scriptural references that speak about Joy: "The joy of the Lord is your strength" Nehemiah 8:10; "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning" Ps. 30:5; "They that sow in tears shall reap in joy" Ps 126:6; "With joy shall you draw water out of the wells of salvation" Is. 12:3; and in John 15:11: "These things have I spoken to you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full."

Christian joy is independent of all things on earth because it has its source in the continual presence of Christ. I am remembering one scene in the Fiddler on the Roof where Tevye's older daughter, Tzeitel, falls in love with the Tailor. After the wedding, Tevye, her Father, comments, "they are so happy together they don't even notice how poor they are." We can say two lovers are happy wherever they are because they have each other. The Christian can never lose his/her joy because he/she can never lose Christ.

There is a theology of joy that belongs in our faith right along side of our theology of the incarnation, and the cross, and the resurrection. The theology of joy found in scriptures lifts our spirits high and therefore we are able to cope with the seriousness of life and the situations we face from day to day.

Paul, writing to the church in Philippi, uses the words joy and rejoice fourteen times in this short letter. Paul's ministry in Philippi is one of the most thrilling chapters in Paul's life. He came to this Roman colony in response to a divine call on his second missionary tour. Years later he returned to Macedonia after leaving Ephesus on his third missionary tour and once again on his way back to Syria. Of all the churches Paul had founded, none seemed to be so near and dear to him as the church at Philippi. The letter to the Philippians breathes an atmosphere of perfect love and mutual confidence, these were friends who had often helped Paul with their gifts and had not forgotten him now that he was in prison. Love and gratitude are expressed everywhere in the chapters of this Christian love letter.

This letter to the Philippians is often called a hymn of joy. It could have been written only by one who had found Christ to be all sufficient. Paul makes it clear that Jesus is the joy of his faith as well as the joy of the church.

Joy belongs to a genuine Christian faith, and it is a by-product of a loving relationship with God through Jesus Christ even when disappointments or disagreements in life come along. It is, after all, one of the outward manifestations of the presence of the Holy Spirit that Paul listed in his letter to the church in Galatia"love, joy, peace.....,etc."

The Roman Catholic church has a number of requirements before it will canonize someone as a Saint. One excellent feature is that the candidate for sainthood must be shown to have had Christian joy - a joy that had deep roots in the living God, transcending all circumstances. Faith in Christ gives joy in living, for Jesus is indeed "the joy of heaven to earth come down."

If there is something in our life right now that is hard for us to face, or if there is something we must deal with, some situation that is very disturbing to us, or if we feel deep sorrow because of some loss or anticipated loss, or whatever burden we may be carrying at this time, know that God's promises are for sure. Christian joy can still

remain in us. Remember that this joy that lays deep in us does not have to mean we are cheerful in all situations. This joy that I speak about is a deep peace knowing that God is in control of all situations and we can trust God with all his promises to us. If rejoicing in the Lord is hard to fathom now, Eugene Peterson puts it this way: "Celebrate God always." We can celebrate God and rely on him always. "The Lord is near." Therefore we need not be afraid. "Do not worry about anything - but in everything - let your requests be known to God." He wishes to hear our desires, our heartaches. "The God of peace will be with you." "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." We are not on our own to face difficult things. "God will fully satisfy every need of yours." These words of Paul to the Philippians can remind us again of the joy that lives deep inside each of us.

Many years ago, a little boy was given a priceless possession: his deceased grandfather's gold pocket watch. How he treasured it! But one day, while playing at his father's ice plant, he lost the watch amid all the ice and sawdust. He searched and scratched, becoming frantic, but no watch. Then he suddenly realized what to do. He stopped scurrying around and became very still. In the silence, he heard the watch ticking.

God has given each of us a priceless gift of joy in Jesus. How easy it is to lose our joy in the scurrying around of life. Yet it is always there to find, if we will but pause and listen to the beautiful presence of Jesus in our hearts. Let us live in the joy that is deep down and holds us up, our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.