

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
305 EAST MAIN STREET  
DURHAM, NC 27701  
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



**“Joy in These Days”  
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)  
October 15, 2017  
Philippians 4: 4-9; Exodus 32: 1-14; Luke 14: 15-24;**

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There are days in our lives when we don't feel very much like rejoicing. You know the days: when you watch the news media report on all the recent natural disasters – hurricanes, earthquakes, flooding, fires – sometimes more than one a week; when you wake up to news of mass murder at a Las Vegas music festival; when you hear our nation's leaders belittling one another, fighting, and name-calling like spoiled children; when the threat of nuclear war is once again real and terrifying; when God's children are neglected, bullied, cast out, abused, and vilified because of their race, nationality, language, sexual identity, gender identity, religion, or immigration status.

You know the days personally, too: when the bills come in and you don't know how they are going to get paid; when the boss tells you how the company

can't fund your position anymore; when your kids can't stop arguing and there's a leak under the sink and dinner just burned and the in-laws are on their way.

You know the days; when you are in so much pain you can't get out of bed; when you are so depressed you can't make a single decision; when the diagnosis is given to your parent, or your child, or your best friend, or you. You know the days. There are days in our lives when we don't feel very much like rejoicing.

And then we turn to our passage for today and hear Paul saying, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice." And we respond, "In the midst of all of this? How can we be joyful? How can anyone rejoice?"

You see, in the face of such days, rejoicing is *not* the first response we have. In fact, it's usually not on the list of responses at all! Grief and sadness are more likely, and confusion, of course, followed quickly by anger and fear. We are angry at the world for being so out of control. We are angry about climate change and the forces behind it. We are angry at those who disagree with us. We are angry at war and violence and hatred in our cities and in our world. Sometimes, we are angry at ourselves for getting ourselves into whatever mess we are in, or we are angry with our family or our co-workers or anyone else who might be standing around close enough to get into trouble. We are angry at the government or at

certain politicians. And anger often leads to blame. Someone or something is surely to blame, and if we can just figure out who or what, we can send all our anger in that direction.

Anger and blame are definite responses to these kinds of days that we have experienced over and over again lately. These emotions are often followed quickly by fear. We have a lot to fear these days. We fear for our health, our safety, our security, our future, our lives. We fear being out of control. We fear being in pain. We fear for the health and safety of those we love. We fear losing our independence. Or we fear finding it. We fear what people will think of us. We fear being poor. We fear being sick. We fear being alone. So many things in life keep us afraid. There are so many ways we can dwell on the things that happen to us in “these days, these horrible days.” These days are hardly worthy of our rejoicing, are they? Surely Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, didn’t mean that we are to rejoice ALWAYS. Who, after all, is capable of doing that?

Before we seek an answer to that question, I want first to point out that the world “rejoice” is from the same root as the word “joy.” Joy is often equated with happiness. But as Christians, we understand the two in very different ways. Happiness is a wonderful feeling caused by external, circumstantial happenings –

some are happy when they receive applause or accolades for something they have done well, some are happy when they win the lottery, some are happy when they watch their favorite television show, some are happy when they are with friends or family. This kind of happiness often fades, however, when the external causal factor goes away. Joy is different.

Joy is an internal feeling of full contentment, peace, and wholeness. It is deep and long-lasting and does not depend on a particular event to trigger it. Joy persists through any and all circumstances, relating to the spiritual world as well as the physical world. Joy is something we experience in the depth of our being. Paul Tillich calls joy “the expression of our essential and central fulfillment” and claims that no peripheral fulfillment can be substituted for this central one. Such joy is God’s intention in Christ for us all.

Paul knows this and believes it and shares his exhortation with the Philippians. He desires for them to have this joy now, even though they are experiencing some internal conflict, even though they have opponents seeking to steer them off course. The Philippians are hearing this message of joy from a man who was living it out, who was able to rejoice in the Lord even though he was in

prison, even though he was being persecuted for his faith, even though he suffered from bodily affliction.

But how do we come to this joy, if we are not like Paul, if we do not yet have it, have not yet experienced it? How do we arrive at this place of joyful fulfillment, especially in a life that often seems unfulfilled? Surely we all *desire* joy, but how do we find it?

C.S. Lewis, twentieth century Christian writer and theologian, wrote a good bit about joy. Before he experienced this joy, Lewis was bound and determined *not* to believe in God. But the God he so wanted to deny kept coming back to him, hounding him, pursuing him, until he finally relented and embraced God. His life changed and he began to write and speak about the deep love and amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ. A big part of his writing and speaking had to do with joy. In one of his books, *Letters to Malcolm*, he writes, "Joy is the serious business of heaven." Joy, you see, is about a life changed, about a deep and abiding sense of wholeness. And Lewis believes you find such joy by staying close, intimately close, to God.

In the first book of Lewis' beloved children's series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Aslan, the lion who is the Christ-figure in the book, breathes on all the

people and creatures whom the witch had turned into statues. When the breath of the lion hits them, they come to life, filled with energy and joy. In his book *Mere Christianity*, Lewis describes how we, like the statues, can be brought to life and joy when we stay close to the very life-breath of God. He writes:

If you want to get warm you must stand near the fire: if you want to be wet you must get into the water. If you want joy, power, peace, eternal life, you must get close to, or even into, the thing that has them. . . .<sup>1</sup>

This is the kind of joy, peace, and eternal life Paul experiences on and from the day of his conversion on the road to Damascus. It is a joy of union with the depth of God's reality. It is a joy that knows that by all rights things should have come out differently. But by the grace of God through Christ, we are welcomed, invited, begged even, to come into covenant fellowship, to dine with Christ at the heavenly banquet table (as our Luke passage describes today), and to be in intimate relationship with our God who has come to us in Jesus. This is the way to joy – resting in the very presence of God at all times and in every way.

Will this be easy? Of course not. The world screams for our attention and begs us to turn away from God and get caught up in the evils and temptations of

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<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, (Touchstone: New York, 1996), pp. 153-154.

the world – the temptations to anger, fear, judgment, and chaos. We are tempted daily to react to the world around us with despair and to be frozen because we are consumed by the hatred and evil around us, frozen just like the creatures of Narnia were frozen by the witch. God begs us to find our peace and joy in God’s arms of grace and mercy. Can we tell the difference?

Frederick Buechner describes our temptation to be reactors to the world.

He writes:

The world floods in on all of us. The world can be so kind, and it can be cruel. It can be beautiful, and it can be appalling. It can give us good reason to hope and good reason to give up all hope. It can strengthen our faith in a loving God, and it can decimate our faith. In our lives in the world, the temptation is always to go where the world takes us, to drift with whatever current happens to be running strongest. When good things happen, we rise to heaven; when bad things happen, we descend to hell. When the world strikes out at us, we strike back, and when one way or another the world blesses us, our spirits soar. I know this to be true of no one as well as I know it to be true of myself. I know how just the weather can affect my whole state of mind for good or ill, how just getting stuck in a

traffic jam can ruin an afternoon that in every other way is so beautiful that it dazzles the heart. We are in constant danger of being not actors in the drama of our own lives but reactors. The fragmentary nature of our experience shatters us into fragments. Instead of being whole, most of the time we are in pieces, and we see the world in pieces, full of darkness at one moment and full of light the next.

But we don't have to be reactors. We can be those who draw close to Jesus, so close that his very breath warms us and brings us peace and hope and joy.

It is in Jesus, of course, and in the people whose lives have been deeply touched by Jesus, and in ourselves in those moments when we are also deeply touched by him, that we see another way of being human in this world, which is the way of wholeness.<sup>2</sup>

The joy that Jesus gives to us and surrounds us with is far beyond the short-lived and shallow happiness we experience from the world. Christ's peace and joy are deep and lasting and cannot be torn apart by the events of the world. They

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<sup>2</sup> Frederick Buechner, *The Longing for Home*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

are the kind of peace and joy that are offered at the wedding feast and banquet table of God where all are invited and those who come find wholeness forever.

Our ancestors and prophets across the ages have known this and have found joy even in the midst of troubling days. I have often found comfort in the words of the Psalmists and prophets, and from a more recent ancestor in the faith, Robert Lowry. Lowry wrote the song, How Can I Keep from Singing, in the late 1860s, shortly after the end of the Civil War and the assassination of President Lincoln. I close with his words of joy even in the midst of all this.

1 My life flows on in endless song;  
above earth's lamentation,  
I catch the sweet, though far-off hymn  
that hails a new creation.

Refrain:

No storm can shake my inmost calm  
while to that Rock I'm clinging.  
Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth,  
how can I keep from singing?

2 Through all the tumult and the strife,  
I hear that music ringing.  
It finds an echo in my soul.  
How can I keep from singing? [Refrain]

3 What though my joys and comforts die?  
I know my Savior liveth.  
What though the darkness gather round?  
Songs in the night he giveth.

4 The peace of Christ makes fresh my heart,  
a fountain ever springing!  
All things are mine since I am his!  
  
How can I keep from singing?

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*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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