

If you have a pink candle in your Advent wreath, today's the day to light it. Rejoice and joy are the dominant themes for this week.

Today's Advent watchword is "*rejoice.*" If you study the first sentence of the reading you begin to understand that the Apostle Paul implies that we should be committed to rejoicing *long term*: it's as if he were saying to us, "rejoice, again and again with no termination." Joy marks the lives of Christians. But joy is not laughter. Being a joyful person, a joyful Christian, does not imply that we never have pain or experience sorrow. In fact quite the opposite is true: in this life we will know sorrow and pain.

We love the 23rd Psalm precisely because it reminds us that when we walk through those valleys of darkness, pain and the shadow of death, God is with us. Christians should know and understand that there is a difference between joy and laughter. between joy and experiencing pleasure. But, have you ever encountered someone expressing emotions that were completely out of place? It happens.

A few years ago I was asked to accompany a Hardyston police officer to deliver some bad news to a local family. At first we found only a daughter home, so we had to wait for the parents to arrive. The girl demanded to know why were at her door asking for her parents. Eventually she surmised that we were the bearers of bad news; her response to the policemen and me was anger.

A couple days later I attended the funeral. The young girl, in her late teens I think, was altogether disconnected from reality. Her older brother had been killed in an auto accident. Her way of dealing with the devastating news was to praise God and to thank Jesus. She wanted to tell everyone how wonderful it was that her brother was in heaven.

Looking back I'm inclined to think she was in shock. Unlike her Roman Catholic parents who endured the funeral obsequies with a quiet dignity, she made most of the mourners, including the priest, very uncomfortable. She was quite rude to him, as she was to me. We didn't believe enough. We didn't have faith, she insisted. It was clear that at some point she had embraced a fundamentalist Christianity. Her father had to take her aside and asked her to control herself.

I am inclined to think she was trying her best to “rejoice always,” trying to rejoice in the Lord. There are several Psalm verses and a few Old Testament scripture verses that counsel the righteous to rejoice in God. But you can understand perhaps where I am going with this.

To be filled with joy (to have the joy of Jesus) does not mean that we stop feeling the burdens, the heartaches, and the sorrows of life. To exhibit joy when others are in the midst of sorrow is just wrong. It can be cruel. In fact, our friend Paul counsels us:

- ◆ *“Conduct ourselves in a manner that is worth of the Gospel.”* (Phil 1:27)
- ◆ *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”* (Ro 12:15)
- ◆ *God [is] the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.* (2 Co 1)

In a real way you and I have been given a ministry of presence and solidarity with those who carry heavy burdens. Compassionately you can stand beside them and hold them up. By your prayers and supplications you can carry others into the presence of Jesus who invites all people to share their burdens with him, *“I will give you rest,”* he says.

The ministry of presence and solidarity is exactly what Paul experienced with the Philippians. They became his partners in the joy of spreading the Gospel, and they stood by him in Paul’s imprisonment and in his illness. In the letter (2:25) he thanks the Christians in Philippi for sending Epaphroditus to minister to his needs. The irony is that while with Paul, Epaphroditus became concerned about what was going on at home. Paul, however, was able to rejoice in their kindness, in their concern, and in the love they expressed.

Rejoice. Rejoice Paul says, not because I am in prison, but because my imprisonment serves to advance the Gospel. The entire praetorian guard knows that I am in jail because I preach Jesus Christ the Son of God (1:13), and because I share in his redemptive sufferings. Rejoice, because some of them may believe and come to faith in Jesus.

John the Baptist, had he not been in Herod’s dungeon might have rejoiced with the answer his followers brought back to him. Jesus was the messiah. The deaf hear the Gospel, the lame walk and the blind see. Perhaps in a very quiet way John did rejoice. John could rejoice because he had succeeded in the work which God had

given him. He had prepared the way for the Lord.

You can rejoice with Paul and John. You can

1. Rejoice that you were present and able to help a friend in their hour of need.
2. Rejoice that you were kept your head when others were panicking.
3. Rejoice that you have food, are able to buy food and share it with those who are less fortunate.
4. Rejoice that you have the where-with-all to keep your pledge to Prince of Peace Church.
5. Rejoice for answered prayer and the gift of healing.
6. Rejoice in your faith; rejoice in the Spirit for the certainty of God's love that came to you by way of your aunt or a pastor or a Bible class teacher.
7. Rejoice when someone asks you about Jesus and gives you the opportunity to share your story.

Rejoice in the Lord always. Hear the Word again, rejoice!